

As in any perfectly normal neighborhood, the lights in every house were out by 12:00. It was a weeknight, after all. The very normal street was dark but for the small amount of light given off by the streetlamps. And one upstairs window, in which three figures were silhouetted against the window, and had been there for some time.

It was a cool night on Privet Drive, and Vernon and Petunia Dursley were both tossing and turning in their bed, trying to forget the three extra residents of their house, and what was going on in the bedroom just a few feet down the hall from them. The loud snoring that usually came from Dudley's room was absent; he too was having trouble sleeping over the sound coming from the small upstairs bedroom. It wasn't a particularly loud conversation, but being the only sound on the entire street gave it some volume.

Dudley pulled a pillow over his head, trying to ignore it.

"So, our first order of business—"

"Order of business?" said one of the occupants of the room disbelievingly. "There are three of us in this room, Hermione. It's not any kind of official meeting." Despite this reprimand, he looked at the first speaker affectionately.

"That may be, Ronald," said Hermione Granger primly, tucking a strand of bushy brown hair behind her ear. "That doesn't mean we can't act like more than complete amateurs all the time."

Ron laughed quietly. "Fine, then. Continue," he said, gesturing at her.

Hermione looked back down at the list she had made. "The first thing we need to do," she said, glancing at Ron, "is train. All of us, not just you, Harry. Yes, we know about the prophecy," she said as the third occupant of the room began to say something, "But we're going to meet Death Eaters on the way. You know we will."

The third occupant leaned back, sighed, and rubbed his forehead. "But Dumbledore said it himself, Hermione, Voldemort is an amazing dueler, even without his Horcruxes." By far the most subdued of the

three, Harry Potter glanced around the room to avoid looking at his friends.

The fourth bedroom on Number Four, Privet Drive was a far cry from what it had been when Harry, Ron and Hermione arrived. Although Harry was still not legally allowed to do magic, Hermione, after seeing the room, had immediately set about expanding it and transfiguring Harry's bed into a much nicer four-poster, reminding him of his Hogwarts dormitory. Hermione had also managed to transfigure two of Dudley's old toys, still gaining dust on the shelves, into cots for her and Ron. Ron had set about shooting jets of paint out of his wand with a spell Hermione had looked up, and now the walls were a bright shade of red. While Hermione handled the harder spellwork, Ron had also vanished the old, creaking shelves and toys cluttering the room and successfully managed to conjure bedsheets for the three of them.

It was certainly much nicer than it had been to start with, but Harry was still counting down the hours until he could leave the house. He was determined to remain true to Dumbledore's last wishes, but it was hard when he had to see the Dursleys every day.

"Harry?"

He jerked out of his reverie and glanced at Hermione sheepishly. "Sorry. I was thinking."

"All right," she said gently, and Harry wondered what Hermione thought he had been thinking about. Probably Ginny. He had thought about her a fair amount in the past few days, but hadn't changed his decision regarding her. She would be safer away from him.

They had both been rather subdued and awkward on the train ride home. She hadn't been sad, or depressed, by any means; she had told him point blank that she had waited for him before, and she was still not giving up on him now.

"I was just going to show you this list. The first thing we need to do, of course, is find the Horcruxes and destroy them." Harry nodded. "But Harry...we don't actually know how. Dumbledore never showed you how to destroy a Horcrux."

"And I don't fancy my hands looking like Dumbledore's did," Ron put in. Harry winced, as he did each time he heard Professor Dumbledore's name. He had thought he was all right after the funeral, but now he couldn't stop thinking about the old headmaster.

"But before we go searching for them we need training, like I said," continued Hermione. "We can do it like we did before the Triwizard tournament, finding new jinxes and learning them ourselves."

"Death Eaters will know better spells than the ones in The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 6, Hermione," said Harry bitingly.

She ignored the tone of voice, though Ron looked at Harry warningly. "That's why we're going to Diagon Alley tomorrow. We could pick up some advanced spellbooks. And I want to make a trip into Muggle London."

Harry shrugged. "Even if we do, I have more than a month until I can do magic, Hermione. What am I supposed to do until then?"

"You could write a letter," suggested Ron, earning a snort from Harry.

"To who?" Harry said. "Scrimgeour? 'Would you mind if I did underage wizardry?' sure. He'd probably want me to do something in return, like—" He couldn't think of anything appropriate to Scrimgeour. He sighed and picked up the Daily Prophet. It was still covering the death of Albus Dumbledore and the funeral, as if three days worth of newspapers hadn't been enough already. Today's headline confirmed Minerva McGonagall as new Headmistress.

"We'll figure something out tomorrow," said Hermione. Ron yawned loudly. "We should get to sleep."

Harry shrugged again. He didn't really care about much at the moment.

Miles away, another light was on.

The world was still reeling from the loss of Albus Dumbledore. Minerva McGonagall had reeled, too, for two nights. But she had realized that life went on. Besides which, it wasn't as if Albus was gone forever. She was having a conversation with him right now, in fact.

She hadn't changed the head's office at Hogwarts much. Some of the small silver instruments had been moved to a secure location until someone who knew how to use them appeared. Albus's portrait continued to be rather secretive about them.

"Harry is still at Privet Drive," Minerva reported, and the portrait nodded its head quietly. "He took Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger with him."

"And how did Molly react to that?" asked the portrait, smiling.

"Nastily," said Minerva, recalling the scene on Platform Nine and Three Quarters less than a week ago. "And they haven't even broken to her their intentions regarding the search."

She had learned about that quite by accident, when she overheard Potter, Weasley and Granger conversing quietly at the funeral about what the mysterious final Horcrux could be.

She had been disappointed by their decision not to come back to Hogwarts, although not entirely surprised. She had known that, once Potter knew about the Horcruxes, no one would be able to keep him, or his friends, out of the search, not even Molly Weasley.

"Do you think you made the right choice regarding Severus?" she asked the portrait softly. She hadn't gotten up the courage to ask the question before, though she had been longing to know.

She was one of the few Order members to know about Albus and Severus' plan. She had been stunned at the thought of Severus making an Unbreakable Vow to kill or help kill Albus, and even more stunned at Albus agreeing to it. Although his theory of putting Severus in a perfect position to help the light side, as one of

Voldemort's now most trusted advisors, she couldn't understand why Albus had been so willing to give up his life.

"I do, Minerva," said Albus gently. "And if Severus ever comes back to the school in need of help, I would be grateful if you could give it to him."

She had to keep from snorting at that—there was no way that Severus Snape would ever come to anyone for help—but underlying this, she was disappointed at the undetailed answer.

"And Alastor was elected head of the Order in your absence," Minerva changed the subject. "He's scheduled several emergency meetings regarding the wards around Grimmauld Place. Several have collapsed without you. And we need a new secret keeper." It was a measure of her own self-control that she could speak of this without wincing. "I volunteered myself, of course, but I believe Moody intends to choose Kingsley."

Most heads of Hogwarts consulted the portraits for not much more than certain decisions regarding students, or what was going on in their other frames. Albus would certainly be useful for that, she thought wryly.

Portraits of Albus had gone up in various places all over London. He seemed to have made generous donations to a huge number of Wizarding foundations or corporations, and consequently had portraits put up in places such as St Mungo's, Gringotts, and several levels in the Ministry.

In any case, Minerva was determined to keep Albus up-to-date on anything regarding the Order or Voldemort, at least until the war was over. She knew Albus' portrait wanted to keep up just as much as she wanted him to, but it was difficult to remember to tell him everything.

"And the wedding?" Albus smiled. "How are preparations?"

"Oh, Mr. Weasley is nearly recovered from his wounds. They'll just have to make sure to have Steak Tartare as part of the menu. Miss Delacour is frantic, of course. The brides always are." She recalled

something Molly had told her at the meeting last night. “I believe Ginny is a bit restless, though. She may do something drastic without those three around.”

“Let her, Minerva. She can do nothing but good for Mr. Potter.”

She sighed and went back to the paperwork. It seemed that there were thousands of things she needed to sign in order to secure the job of Head of Hogwarts. She wasn't entirely sure just how many people would be sending their children to Hogwarts this year, with Albus gone. She only hoped she could provide for the few who did.

“Potter!”

Harry groaned. Why was Professor Snape yelling at him? It wasn't even the school year, he had no right...

“Potter!”

He jerked awake, remembering who else lately called him ‘Potter’. After the verbal intimidation Uncle Vernon had suffered by a nearly six-foot tall Ron and a wand-bearing Hermione, he had moved away from Harry's traditional title of ‘boy’ and begun calling him by his surname. Harry had no problem with this, as it was what he was called by most of his professors at school, and being called ‘Harry’ by Uncle Vernon would be somewhat disturbing.

He tumbled out of bed and shoved his glasses onto his face, noting that he had forgotten to change clothes for bed last night and was garbed in wrinkled clothing from yesterday. It would have to do; Uncle Vernon was still yelling.

He took a peek down the stairs before walking down. Vernon could yell a little longer. Harry didn't care much about his demands. But what he saw in the entrance of Number Four shocked him awake.

“Ginny?”

She looked up to see him taking the stairs down three at a time. “Hey, Potter.” She smiled, glancing at Uncle Vernon. She was dressed simply in a white blouse and jean skirt. Harry couldn't help being

impressed with her ability to choose appropriate muggle clothing, considering what the rest of her family were like.

“Gin, what are you doing here?” said Harry, noting her trunk sitting on the carpet behind her. He began to feel slightly worried. “We’ll be back at your place in a week and a half—”

“I couldn’t wait that long, Harry,” interrupted Ginny. Her eyes were bright. “You should see it back there. Everyone moping over Dumbledore, then moping over Bill, then turning around and doing these frantic preparations for the wedding...you should see Phlegm, she won’t shut her—”

“Ginny?”

Ron had appeared at the top of the stairs, Hermione at his shoulder. Both were looking shocked. “How did you get here?”

“The Knight Bus,” said Ginny, shrugging. “I left Mum a note. They’ll understand.”

“Wait, Gin,” said Ron. Harry prepared himself for the explosion. “You want to live here with us now?”

Uncle Vernon was turning purple, and Harry glanced at him. “You have a problem?” he said quietly.

Uncle Vernon shook his head mutely, and then walked into the kitchen where, Harry presumed, he would be opening a bottle of the Muggle equivalent of Firewhisky. Ginny giggled.

“I don’t think you get this, Ginny,” said Ron, his ears reddening. “You just came here? You could have been attacked along the way, you know. Your note could have gotten lost, and Mum and Dad wouldn’t know where you had gone. They might think you got kidnapped!” his voice rose. “Is it all so you can get to Harry? You two split up, and we’re leaving after the wedding anyway!”

Ginny stepped toward Ron menacingly. “Yes, it is all about Harry, Ron! Of course I want to be near him! I know we broke up, but thanks

for reminding me! Harry needs all the support he can get! I know what the prophecy says, Ron! I was there when he told you, remember?" she turned away from Ron and looked at Harry somewhat apprehensively, Harry thought. "If you don't want me here, Harry, I'll leave. But I'm a target too, whether we're going out or not. I just want to help."

"No, Ginny, of course I want you here—" said Harry helplessly. "I guess you can stay, but not forever, I mean, you heard Ron, we're leaving after the funeral."

Ginny's eyes sharpened. "I'm not going to ask right now, but I'm going to find out why, Harry. And I'm going to help, and don't try to stop me." She looked back at the stairs, where Ron and Hermione still stood. "Do you have an extra bed, Hermione? Maybe you could share one with my brother."

"Don't push it," warned Ron, though Harry noticed his blush, as well as Hermione's. "If Harry says you can stay, you can. He's the leader here. But you're still my sister."

"So? You're still afraid of spiders."

Ron glared, but Ginny had turned back to Harry. "So where do you live in this house?"

Harry grinned and showed her up the stairs.

Despite Ginny settling in, the trio refused to delay their plans to go to Diagon Alley. Hermione would have been side-along Apparating Harry, since Ron was likely incapable, but Ginny's presence complicated matters. It was eventually decided that they would go to Arabella Figg's and floo. This was decided with much glaring at Ginny from Ron.

Harry wasn't entirely sure just why she had come. It wasn't as if she didn't have other friends she could have gone and stayed with, with Molly's blessing. Mrs. Weasley had been hard to convince in the beginning that Ron should be able to stay. He remembered the day



they had gotten off the Hogwarts Express to greet the parents and Order members.

The train pulled into the station, and Harry's heart jolted at seeing the crowd on the platform. Every single person was dressed in black. It was a dreadful reminder of Dumbledore's recent death, and the deaths of so many others that year.

Molly was standing on the far side of the platform along with Arthur, Fred and George, who were talking to a pink-haired Tonks. As soon as they stepped off the train, Molly, who had obviously been searching the crowd for them, rushed forward, engulfing Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny in hugs, two at a time. When she stepped back, Harry was shocked to see tear-tracks on her cheeks.

"The wedding is on the Twelfth," she said, seemingly unaware of what she looked like. "Harry, I don't know where you're staying—I'm sure with Dumbledore," she gulped, "gone, you don't have to go back to those muggles, but you must be there for the wedding. Ron, Ginny, you're at the Burrow, and Hermione, you're always welcome—"

"Mum," said Ron awkwardly. "We're...we're going with Harry."

"What?" said Molly, halting in mid-rant.

"I'm going back to the Dursleys for a week, Mrs. Weasley," said Harry quickly. "Ron and Hermione..." he trailed off, unsure of what to say.

"We're going with him," repeated Ron. "To the muggles. He can't go back there alone. I won't let him."

"Why go there at all?" said Molly, her voice going deadly quiet, the way it always did before the explosion.

"The blood protection still works, wherever Dumbledore is," said Harry carefully. "He asked me to—to go back. I'm just going to go back for a week, Mrs. Weasley. Can Ron and Hermione please come?"

Mrs' Weasley frowned at her son, and Hermione, who was now leaning against Ron. "I see no reason for you to go, Ron. Hermione, I can't speak for you, but Harry, there is no reason for you to even go back to those...those people."

"Harry just told you, mum. Dumbledore wanted him to go. And I'm of age now. I can go with him whether you want me to or not."

Molly seemed to suddenly realize that Ron was of age, and switched to a new tactic. "Ronald, I will not have you terrorizing those muggles! Harry has survived with them for sixteen years—"

"Do you think he was enjoying himself, mum? I won't terrorize them, but I don't want them treating him like they always do!"

"You don't even know how to live in a muggle house, in a muggle neighborhood! The Statute of Secrecy applies to you whether you're of age or not!"

"I know how to be discreet!" said Ron, his ears reddening. "I'm not so stupid that I'll just do magic in the middle of the street! I'm going, mum—" he began to drag his trunk toward the gateway. Molly rushed after him and Harry, Hermione and Ginny watched as they got into an intense, whispered argument. Seeing Molly whisper while still looking angry was a new phenomenon. To Harry, it seemed that Molly could even shout a whisper.

"Going to the muggles, are you?" said Ginny. She was looking at him with an unreadable expression on her face.

"Yeah," said Harry, and looked away, not wanting to invite more conversation. "Do you have permission, Hermione? You two don't have to—"

"Of course we do, Harry," said Hermione flatly. "I'm not as unprepared as Ron. I wrote my parents a letter the day of the funeral. They know. They'll be at the wedding. I think Ron convinced Bill to invite them."

Harry looked back at Ron. The argument seemed to have ended. Both redheads had very red faces, but Ron was looking pleased, and as he reached them, he said, "let's go."

Harry's last glimpse of the Weasley's was of Ginny's face, still bearing that expression.

Harry thought about it as they walked to Mrs. Figg's house. Things were tense between Ginny and him right now. He hoped that he would eventually understand what she was thinking while she watched the argument.

A/N: Hope you're enjoying the story so you are looking for actual dimension-travel, sorry but isn't coming up until about chapter seven. Things need to be put in place first, and the first few chapters, are just bridging and getting things set. My plan is to update regularly, probably every friday. So please leave a review letting me know how you liked it.

When they came through the floo, Hermione instantly headed toward the muggle exit of the bar. “Hermione,” called Ron after her. “We’re going the other way.”

“This should only take a few minutes,” Hermione called back over her shoulder. “I just want to pick something up from the muggle bookstore, there’s one just next door, you must have seen it—” the door shut behind her, cutting off the remainder of her words.

Marry and Ron looked at each other and shrugged. Ginny rolled her eyes. “You two stay in here. I’ll go let her know we’re waiting in here for her.” She darted through the door without waiting for an answer.

Harry himself had no interest in muggle books, and he was sure Ron had never even seen one. On this basis, they decided not to follow the two girls, Ron saying he was thirsty. They chose a table near the door and ordered four butterbeers.

Hermione and Ginny returned within ten minutes, Hermione bearing a small brown package.

“What is it?” asked Ron, eyeing the package.

“Just a book. You wouldn’t know it.” Hermione took a sip of her butterbeer. “We need a list of what to get here.”

This turned out to be the first time Ron or Ginny had been to Diagon Alley alone. Ron’s first suggestion: “Let’s go into Knockturn Alley!”

“Honestly, Ron,” began Ginny, but Hermione said carefully, “We could do that. There could be shops in there that aren’t dark...maybe shops that can’t afford the rent in Diagon Alley...” she trailed off, looking thoughtful.

“If there were any good shops down there, everyone we know wouldn’t be forbidden to go in,” scoffed Harry.

“We should take a look,” insisted Ron. Harry could tell he hadn’t been thinking the same thing as Hermione, but had now latched onto the

concept of good stores in Knockturn Alley. "Imagine what we could get...weapons..."

"What weapons could you find in Knockturn Alley that you could use?" said Ginny mockingly. "Something where, if you eat it, it kills the other bloke?"

Ron reddened, and Hermione produced a quill and piece of parchment. "We'll only go there if we have time after everything else." She wrote '*Knockturn Alley*' in small print at the bottom of the page.

"Gringotts first," said Harry. I only have about four sickles on me right now after these drinks."

"I can pay, Harry," said Ron sharply.

"Don't worry about it, mate. I'll take them right now."

"I'll pay you back," muttered Ron, his ears reddening. Harry tried to ignore it.

"Flourish and Blotts next," volunteered Ginny, and Hermione scribbled it down. "You're training. We need to know some advanced spells."

"We need to know some advanced spells, Ginny," said Ron. "You're not coming."

"To what?" she said tartly. "You haven't told me where you're going after the wedding. If you're not going to tell me, at least don't keep talking about it so vaguely."

"We'll tell you later," broke in Harry. "Madam Malkins, Hermione. I don't own any robes that aren't school robes."

"WWW, too," said Hermione thoughtfully. "We could get things like those decoy detonators, and—"

"Pygmy Puff food," said Ginny brightly. "I'm almost out. Arnold's getting hungry."

Ron rolled his eyes. Harry grinned at Ginny.

“The apothecary,” said Hermione, writing it down. “And maybe the cauldron shop, I know yours is half-melted, Ron—”

“Hermione, we won’t be making potions! You know what we’re doing—” he glanced warily at Ginny. “Why would I need a cauldron for that?”

“Maybe it takes a potion to destroy them,” suggested Harry, who didn’t particularly care whether Ginny knew or not.

“He’s right,” put in Hermione. “Any other suggestions, you three?”

“Quality Quidditch supplies,” said Harry and Ron at the same time. They grinned at each other. “And Florean Fortescue’s,” added Ron.

“We can’t. It got shut down last year, remember? Besides, we’re not looking for leisure items. You two don’t need new broomsticks.”

“You don’t need any new books, either,” muttered Ron almost inaudibly. Harry barely kept from laughing, being the only one who had heard Ron.

Ginny stood up. “Gringotts first.” The trio stood up as well, and made their way through the Leaky Cauldron and into Diagon Alley.

The street was far from the bustling, crowded space Harry had seen in previous years. He supposed he should have expected it to be somewhat emptier, considering what had happened in the past few years, but the death of Albus Dumbledore had convinced the few who went to Diagon Alley regularly that they shouldn’t anymore. There were dozens of boarded-up shop windows facing the group, most prominently Ollivanders, Florean Fortescue’s, although Harry could see more boarded-up windows all the way down the street. There were less than ten people in his line of sight out on the street.

“Oh,” said Hermione quietly. It was the only sound Harry could hear on the street.

“Let’s go,” said Ginny over-enthusiastically, but Harry could see she too was affected by the desolate sight.

Gringotts was slightly more populated than the street outside. There were people at nearly half of the counters. Harry approached one of the empty counters and presented his key. “Harry Potter,” he said quietly, trying not to draw attention to himself. The goblin’s eyes sharpened and several heads turned, but other than that there was no reaction from the building. It almost seemed as if the building and street outside were dead.

The goblin took his key and examined it, then said sharply, “You are aware that, as a minor, you are not legally allowed to retrieve more than one thousand galleons from your vault without the consent of a guardian?” Harry sighed, and wished his birthday had been earlier in the year. It was causing so many problems. A thought struck him.

“Rubeus Hagrid was with me in my first year—”

“The amount you withdrew was much less than one thousand, Mr. Potter.” Harry glanced at Hermione, who whispered, “That is a law, Harry. History of Magic, fourth year.”

Harry shrugged. He wouldn’t need more than one thousand today, he was sure.

The atmosphere seemed to be affecting the four of them as they got into the cart. Harry could imagine that Hermione was not thrilled about the wild ride and that was what was causing her silence, but both Ron and Ginny were looking grim, and Harry was feeling that way himself.

He went in and out of his vault quickly, gathering coins indiscriminately and stuffing them into a bag while trying to shield the door from his three friends. Hermione seemed to not care about what the vault contained, and looked to be wishing that she had waited in the lobby, but Ron had proved he was still vulnerable to jealousy.

They went to the Weasley vault next, and Ron admitted that he and Ginny had been treated to thirty galleons each of spending money that summer. Harry remembered that Mr. Weasley had gotten

promoted and must now have a much higher income, but remembering that one of his potions books last year had cost twelve galleons, he knew thirty was still not that many.

Hermione quickly excused herself the moment they got back to the lobby, and went in search of a toilet. Ginny followed, and Ron found himself saddled with the gray package.

"Wonder what this is?" he began to cautiously lift the tape from the package, then jerked his hand back, sucking his fingers.

"Stinging hex, I think," said Harry, taking the package. "She is paranoid...who would want to steal her muggle book? Besides you, I mean." He grinned at Ron, whose middle finger was swelling.

Hermione returned minutes later, her face no longer tinged green, and raised an eyebrow at Ron's red fingers, but said nothing.

They headed to Flourish and Blotts, and Hermione, for once, did not instantly vanish, but dragged Harry along with her to the Defense section. One of the staff trailed them, as he apparently had nothing else to do. Two others accosted Ron and Ginny and began asking them what they needed. There looked to be only one or two other customers in the store.

"No, we're fine," he tried to shake off the man in blue robes. "We'll let you know if we need something." Personally he thought that Hermione would be better at finding books than any number of store clerks.

"Hmm..." said Hermione, ignoring Harry's rather rude dismissal. "Ooh, *Jinxes for the Jinxed*, that was good, but you can't take things out of the room of requirement..." she handed the book to Harry, along with two others. Followed by *Advanced Defense*, *Dueling Techniques*, *An Encyclopedia of Curses*, and one that made Harry's eyes narrow: *Protecting your mind: a guide to Occlumency*.

"Why would I need this, Hermione?" he asked sharply as they made their way back to the register and Harry dropped the books.



"Come on, Harry. You need to learn to protect your mind sometime. No, we're going back. Could you keep these for us, please?" this was to the man behind the counter, who was drawing the books toward them. As they wandered toward the transfiguration section, Hermione continued. "What if you're dueling with Voldemort, and you're doing well, and then he starts in on your mind? That could be a pretty nasty distraction, don't you think?"

Harry couldn't argue with the logic, but he still tried. "But I was awful at it last year, Hermione. You know I was. Snape got into my mind every time..." he scowled. Every time he thought about that traitor...

"That's why Snape won't be teaching you," said Hermione briskly. "We can figure it out ourselves...he probably didn't do a good job. It's not like he was a good potions teacher, either. He never taught us the theory, just told us to make things..."

Harry had never thought about this himself. The thought of potions theory almost made him groan loudly, but he stopped himself.

"And here we are," said Hermione. Harry had never seen her happier than she was in a bookstore. Well, maybe when she was arguing with Ron...

Hermione pulled a book off the shelf and showed it to him. He blinked. "*The Animal Within?*"

"Animagi, Harry," said a voice from behind him, and he turned around to see Ginny and Ron. "We got some Charms books we thought might be useful. But becoming an animagi...I never even thought of that."

"And that can be the first thing we do," continued Hermione. "I don't think they can peg you for underage magic for this, Harry. It's wandless, I don't think it involves an incantation..." her eyes sparkled. "Imagine being able to become an animal."

"Me too," added Ginny. "If they won't notice underage magic."

“No—” began Ron, but Harry cut him off. “My parents started in what, their third year, Ron? Ginny can manage it if we can.” Ginny smiled at him, but Ron didn’t look to want to let this one go.

“But what if she does something wrong? It’s not like any of us are healers, when she messes it up we won’t be able to fix it...”

“She’s just as likely to mess it up as you are,” snapped Harry. “Leave it alone, all right?”

He wasn’t sure why he was acting like this. Maybe it was residue from the few weeks he had spent going out with Ginny, but he felt sick of seeing Ron’s overprotectiveness.

“Whatever,” said Ron sullenly. “Don’t come crying to me when you’re, I don’t know, stuck half you, half goose—” he trailed off into mutters. Harry let it go.

“Anyways,” said Hermione, giving *The Animal Within* to Harry. “Here, human transfiguration, and advanced transfiguration...those should be useful. And that’s probably it. Should we go to the potions section?”

“No,” said Harry, Ron and Ginny at once.

“Yes,” said Hermione right back. “Don’t you think that Felix Felicis helped when...when...that night?”

“Yeah, but Slughorn said that takes six months to make,” objected Ron.

“What about Polyjuice?” persisted Hermione. “What if we needed to take a potion for Animagus training?”

“You go grab some books, then, Hermione,” said Harry. “I don’t want anything else to do with the subject. I’ll go pay for everything else.”

“I will to,” interjected Ron.

“Nah. You buy something else. These books are mostly for me. You can borrow them, though.”

The staff of Flourish and Blotts looked like Christmas had come early when they appeared and said that they were ready to make their purchases. When Hermione added the two potions books she had wanted, the total amount to 96 galleons. Harry paid quickly and had Hermione shrink the books so he could carry them.

Their next stop was Madam Malkins, which was as empty as Flourish and Blotts had been. Harry and Ron were both fitted for three robes; Harry chose dark shades of blue, red and green, while Ron took two red robes and a blue, claiming he didn't want to wear Slytherin colors. Ginny also convinced both to buy a pair of dress robes; after all, clothing wasn't as expensive as books. She brought forward various robes for their inspection. Ron eventually chose a dark red robe with a dragon embroidered on the back in silver, which Ginny described as "very macho." Harry, however, couldn't find anything he liked.

"You should get an animal too," said Hermione from a chair. She had finished her fittings ten minutes ago, and now had the animagus book open on her lap. "Maybe your animagus form."

"I don't know what that is, Hermione," said Harry rolling his eyes.

"Here." Said Hermione. Can I try this spell on you? It's supposed to show what animal form you'll take."

Harry looked dubiously at the book. Hermione appeared to be at least twenty pages in. He wondered vaguely what they could put in that book to make it so big.

He wasn't particularly keen to have a spell put on him as Hermione's first try, but he knew she would probably achieve it.

"Can I see the spell?"

"Sure," she said, holding out the book. There it was, beneath a picture of a woman halfway through a transformation to an eagle. "That was Rowena Ravenclaw," she added, pointing at the picture. The woman waved.

The spell description looked straightforward. "I could probably have done this in third year," said Hermione. "Do you want me to try?"

Harry glanced at Madam Malkin, who was wandering to the back of the store, looking for more fabric samples for Harry.. “Fine. But Hermione, if this goes wrong...”

“It won’t,” she said placatingly, and raised her wand. “*Videbo Animalia!*”

A large animal seemed to jump out of Harry’s skin, making him gasp. Although he couldn’t feel anything, the experience was odd. The animal prowled the room for a moment, occasionally walking through things. Harry supposed it was like a ghost, or a patronus. In any case, it vanished soon. There was silence in the room.

“That was a lion,” said Ron eventually. Harry nodded, his mouth open.

“Do that to me, Hermione,” said Ron excitedly.

“Later, maybe,” said Hermione shakily. “Harry, talk to Madam Malkin...”

“Ah,” said Harry to the woman, who had reappeared, apparently not having seen the lion. “Do you have anything with a lion on it?”

She began sorting through her samples, muttering to herself, and eventually coming out with one. It was a midnight-black robe, trimmed in thread...Harry squinted at it. It wasn’t one color. It seemed to rotate through red, gold, silver and green.

“Great. Gryffindor and Slytherin colors,” said Ron.

“When we get out into the real world no one will care what house color your robes have,” reprimanded Hermione.

“Aren’t we in the real world right now, Hermione?” said Harry quietly.

She seemed to have nothing to say to that. He went into the changing room and put on the robes, which automatically fitted themselves to him. There was a lion on the back, but it moved around constantly. It was merely outlined in the same thread that trimmed the sleeves, but Harry liked it. He stepped out of the room. There was silence for a moment.

“Well?”

“I like it,” opined Ginny. “It’s very...mysterious stranger. With the black hair—”

“Right,” said Harry. “Let’s buy them and get out of here, please.”

They made their purchases (nine sickles a robe, except for Harry’s dress robes, which were four Galleons) and left the shop.

“Where to now?” asked Harry. Hermione pulled out the list. WWW.”

The wandered down the street and toward the twins’ shop. Neither twin was currently in the main shop when they walked in, so Harry rang the bell on the counter as Ron, Hermione and Ginny loaded a basket with merchandise. Ginny pulled Arnold the Pymy Puff out of her pocket and dropped him in the cage, letting him mingle with his fellows. Harry watched the pink and purple fluff balls roll around, amused.

“Bad idea, Gin. If you take him back out, we could say you were stealing him, now that he’s in there,” said a voice behind them. Harry turned around to see one of the twins standing there with a grin on his face. His nametag identified him as George, although Harry wouldn’t trust a nametag when it came to Fred and George.

“Hey, Fred,” said Ron, coming around the corner. “Why didn’t you have anyone in the shop when we came in? Not very good service, that.” Fred picked up Arnold and threw him at Ron.

“Business hasn’t been great lately. We’ve only had three people in the shop this week. Not including you four. Mum’s angry at you for leaving, by the way, Gin,” he added carelessly as Ginny picked up Arnold and cuddled him. “She doesn’t have any female companionship now besides Fleur, and I hesitate to say she isn’t enjoying that.”

“You’re wearing the wrong nametag, Fred,” said Ginny.

“Nice try. Don’t change the subject,” said Fred, glancing down at his purple robes. “She was mad enough when you left, Ron, but now Ginny...” he shrugged.

“Anyways,” said Harry, feeling uncomfortable. He had been the one who had taken Ron from Mrs. Weasley in the first place. “You two know we aren’t going back to Hogwarts, right?”

“We do now,” came George’s voice. He rounded the corner.

“Why is that?” said Fred, frowning.

“I mean, I know we did and all.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s some sort of family tradition.”

“Is Ginny going back?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

“Why is she tagging along with you three, then?”

Harry shrugged. He wasn’t entirely sure why, himself.

“You two know what it’s like at home,” said Ginny accusatively. “Why else would you be working full days here when you’re getting three customers a week?”

“She has a point, Fred,” said one of the twins.

“You are Fred,” said Ron.

“Am I?” Fred glanced down at his nametag. “Says right here...”

“Anyways,” said George. “I have to admit, you’re right, Ginny. Mum keeps trying to get us onto flower duty, or the part where we shower the bride with...whatever...”

“She’s trying to get *you two* on flower duty?” said Ron disbelievingly. “Does she want the flowers shooting water at everyone who tries to smell them?”

Fred shrugged. "No one else wants to do it. We'll just tell her we're out looking for roses when she tries to get us to help with the cooking."

"But enough about us. What did you three want?"

"All your defense stuff," said Harry bluntly. "All those decoy detonators and shield cloaks and boots."

"And food for Arnold," added Ginny.

"That too," said Harry, grinning.

"Okay," said Fred. "At least you'll be giving us something to put food in our mouths. You don't pay, though, Harry."

"Yes I do. I'll pay half, if you insist. But I'll pay for everyone else's, too."

After Flourish and Blotts and Madam Malkins, Ron didn't argue. He still looked sullen, though.

"We've been working on these extra-strong shield cloaks," said Fred, leading them into the back room. "Better than *protego*, I mean. Obviously can't protect from Unforgivables, but just about anything else..."

"Of course, they'll be pretty expensive. But Harry, we'll get them for you for half the price of the old ones, if you tell us what you need them for. Boots, too."

Harry looked around. "Do you have somewhere we can sit down?"

“So You-Know-Who split his soul.”

“Into seven pieces. Dumbledore destroyed one and so did I, and there’s one we aren’t sure what it is, but there are four still out there and we need to find them.”

Overall, the twins had taken it well. So had Ginny. The twins still didn’t know about the prophecy, and Harry had no intention of telling them, but they understood that Harry needed to go on this search.

“So you don’t know what all the horcruxes are.”

“And you don’t know where they are.”

“And you don’t know how to destroy them.”

“But you’re going to finish what Dumbledore started?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “We’re working on how to destroy them.” It was a lie, but the twins were doing a good job of making him feel like an idiot.

“Dumbledore knew, didn’t he?” said Fred thoughtfully.

“Yeah, but he—”

“He has a portrait, you know. In McGonagall’s office. Talks and everything. You should go ask it how to destroy a soul.”

Harry’s eyes widened. He hadn’t even thought about the portrait. “That’s a really, really good idea. We’ll do that...” he thought. “Tomorrow.”

“Right,” said George, standing. “I’ll go find you some things to take on the search. The horcruxes might not even be in Europe, you know.”

“I know,” sighed Harry. The magnitude of the search had taken him a few days to accept. The horcruxes could be anywhere in the world, hidden any way. At least they had a fair idea of what most of them were.



“So where are you going to start?” said Ginny quietly.

“Hogwarts, I suppose,” said Harry. “We’ll ask Dumbledore if he had any other leads when he was alive. Maybe have a look in the chamber of secrets too. And the Slytherin common room.”

“The Slytherin common room?” said Ginny. “You don’t even know where that is, let alone how to get in.”

“Well, I know where it is,” said Harry guiltily. “And what the inside looks like...”

“You went in there?” said Fred, leaning forward. “When? Even George and I never got into the Slytherin common room. We know where it is, been in the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff rooms, but never Slytherin...”

“Second year,” said Ron, puffing up at the thought of having done something at Hogwarts that the twins hadn’t. “We were looking for clues about the chamber of secrets.”

“What did you find out?”

“Well...that Malfoy wasn’t the Heir,” said Ron, deflating a bit. “But the furniture was all gray and stony. I would hate to have to spend time there.”

“How did you get in?” asked Fred, looking at them intently. Ron half-glanced at Hermione, who looked from him to Fred and then nodded reluctantly.

“Polyjuice,” Ron said. “Hermione made it and we pretended to be Crabbe and Goyle.” He shuddered. “Disgusting.”

“You made a polyjuice potion so that these two could pretend to be Crabbe and Goyle and get into the Slytherin Common Room?” asked Fred, staring at Hermione in what seemed to be a mixture between disbelief and awe.

Hermione looked down, and Harry knew she was blushing. "I wouldn't do it again," she said. "Things went...wrong."

Fred opened his mouth, but Hermione was saved from explaining exactly what had gone wrong as George returned, bearing a pile of merchandise, clothing on top. "Cloaks," he said, tossing the cloaks, which were as black as Harry's dress robes, at him. "And boots." There were a box of these. "You're going to have to try a couple on. We know you have freakishly huge feet, Ron, but I'm not so sure about Harry and Hermione."

"I want some too," said Ginny. "I know I won't be going with you, Ron. But how safe to you think Hogwarts is going to be this year without Dumbledore?"

"She has a point," said Fred. "But you're definitely not going, Gin. Remember that. I don't want my only sister disemboweled, or something."

"You think we're going to get disemboweled, are we?" said Harry carefully.

"Nah, we can't have hopes that high for Ron," said George.

"Joking," added Fred at the expression on Hermione's face. "Anyway..." he began sorting the pile. "Decoy detonators here. Instant darkness powder here. Pygmy Puff food for Ginny..." he looked up and grinned.

All in all, Harry made a 25 galleon purchase at the twins' store, even with his discount. The twins waved them away with promises to tell Mrs. Weasley that they were doing fine and were happy.

"Honestly," said Ron, shaking his head. "We've been gone for less than a week. She worries so much..."

Harry said nothing, remembering Molly Weasley's boggart two years ago. He couldn't resent her for worrying, especially not after seeing his own body splayed across the floor, blood dripping from a corner of his mouth.

“You know, we should get a tent,” commented Hermione. “Just in case we have to go out of the country We won’t be able to floo back home every night.”

She was pointing at Magical Camping Supplies, a store just across from Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. Harry wondered how that store had stayed in business. It had probably simply made hundreds of Galleons before the Quidditch World Cup three years before, and was still alive now because of that. He couldn’t imagine anyone at Hogwarts camping during their leisure time.

“Who buys this stuff?” muttered Ron, echoing Harry’s thoughts. “Can’t exactly see Malfoy roughing it out in the woods.”

“Snape probably needed one, now that they’re on the run,” said Harry bitterly, effectively curbing conversation.

They entered the store, noting, unsurprisingly, that they were the only customers. Harry led the group over to the tent section, where various tents were shrunk down with descriptions of what they contained written beneath them.

Three floors, Harry read off the tent closest. Eight bedrooms, four bathrooms, kitchen—he didn’t read anymore. They didn’t need any more than three bedrooms.

Hermione was examining the tents too, but Ron had wandered across the store to look at a display of “auto-meals” (tap the picture of your meal with your wand, watch as your meal appears! Unlimited!)

“These would be really useful,” he called. “Should I get some?”

“Yeah,” said Hermione, studying one tent. “This would be perfect, Harry—three bedrooms, two bathrooms, kitchen, main entrance hall. Pre-furnished—I guess that means it already has beds...” She glanced at the price tag. “Oh my.”

“Two hundred Galleons?” said Harry disbelievingly. He moved closer to Hermione. “I’ll buy it. Don’t tell Ron, please.”

She looked at him sidelong. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah." He picked up the miniature tent and rang the bell on the countertop. Ron came over with the food, and Hermione walked off through the shop, looking for anything else useful.

A middle-aged woman came to the counter, looking slightly surprised that anyone would be in her shop, but happily sold him the tent and food packs. Harry was grateful that Ron had followed Hermione back through the shop as the witch read out the price loudly.

Their next stop was the apothecary, where Ron purchased a new basic cauldron. Finally, Harry found himself staring at the dark entrance to Knockturn Alley.

They made their way cautiously in. Harry brushed his fringe down over his scar, but Ron and Ginny's red hair was notorious, and he winced every time someone looked at them.

It seemed that Hermione was right; the shops didn't all look to be dark. They walked past Borgin and Burkes rather fast, but Ron stopped them in front of a tattoo parlor. "I want a tattoo, Hermione. Do that animagus spell on me."

"No wonder your mum didn't want you in here," muttered Hermione. "The first thing you do is ask for a tattoo. No, Ron."

"It would be—" Ron apparently couldn't think of an appropriate adjective. "Harry wants one too."

"What? Um...yeah. Do the spell, Hermione. Just to see what Ron is? We can talk about tattoos after."

"Do you want another lion to pop out and frolic around Knockturn Alley?" hissed Hermione. "Forget it, Ron."

"But it was silent!" protested Ron.

"No."

They moved on, though Ron cast several glances back at the magical tattoo parlor. A hunched wizard tried to sell them what looked to be human skulls, and Ron put his arm around Hermione and rushed her away when her face went green. Harry and Ginny assured the man that they were not interested, and went after Ron and Hermione.

When they caught up, Hermione looked quite all right, and was examining the window of a store. "This place sells magical eyeballs, Harry—I suppose Moody had to get one somewhere. Maybe we could fix your glasses?"

"I'll keep my eyeballs where they are, thanks," said Harry. "A whole store that sells nothing but eyeballs? No wonder it can't afford a place in Diagon Alley. I mean, the only market it Mad-Eye Moody."

Ron snorted with laughter. Hermione rolled her eyes and said, "It's just magical replacements, for, I don't know, limbs and other body parts—shut up." Harry and Ron stopped laughing gradually.

"What kind of other body parts?" said Ginny, sending them off again.

"Never mind, then," snapped Hermione. "There's a bookstore up here, Harry, you mentioned darker spells." She walked quickly away, leaving Harry, Ron and Ginny to run after. Harry tried to placate her.

"Listen, Hermione, I don't need a prosthetic eyeball. I can just get muggle contact lenses if I need them."

"If you want to," she said, shrugging uncaringly. "Look, most of these books don't even have titles. Just look through a few, see whether you see anything..."

"Is it too much to hope that one will have directions on how to make horcruxes?" muttered Ron behind them.

"What are contact lenses, Hermione?" added Ginny. Hermione began to explain, leaving Ron and Ginny shaking their heads in wonder. Harry began searching a plain book with a green cover. He wasn't

sure exactly what he was looking for, but he saw instantly why these books weren't sold in Flourish and Blotts.

"Nasty," he murmured to Ron, who was standing beside him. "These are worse than the Prince's hexes. See, here's one that makes you go blind for ten minutes, and this one makes you so nauseous that you can't do anything but throw up..."

"I'd like to use that on Malfoy," said Ron. "Buy that book, Harry."

"I was thinking Snape," muttered Harry.

"Here's a good one," commented Hermione. "The art of the human mind—Harry, it teaches you how to plant memories, dreams, look through people's minds—this is probably a dark art, but maybe if you read it you can learn to protect yourself against it."

"I'm not learning Legilimency, Hermione," said Harry instantly.

"Don't be a prat, Harry. She said learn to protect yourself against it, not how to do it. Besides, imagine seeing some of Snape's embarrassing memories." Ron snickered, and Harry shivered.

They ended up buying just those two books in the store. Ron drew Hermione to the back of the store and finally convinced her to perform the animagus spell. Harry, frankly, thought it was a stupid idea to do it in the middle of a dodgy store in Knockturn Alley, however far into the back they were.

"Videbo animalia!" the animal burst out of Ron's skin, smaller than Harry's and flew around his head twice before vanishing. Harry stuck his head around a bookshelf to see if anyone had been watching, but it appeared no one had. The store owner was counting galleons and ignoring them.

"A hawk, Ron," said Hermione, smiling. "I'm not sure what kind it was, we'll have to look that up when we get back..."

Ron shrugged, clearly trying to look like he didn't care, but failing miserably. "I could fly without a broom," he said wonderingly.

“Imagine that, Harry.” He drew his wand, and with no warning, repeated the incantation, pointing his wand at Hermione.

A small owl with brown feathers reminiscent of Hermione’s hair jumped out of her stomach and flew around for a moment before vanishing. Harry stared at the place where it had been.

“That might have been an eagle owl,” said Ginny, breaking the silence. “We probably can’t know until you turn into it, Hermione. Can you do the spell on me?”

Hermione began to berate Ron about performing the spell on her without asking, but Harry thought she may have been pleased with her form.

“Hermione?”

Hermione glanced at Ginny and pointed her wand.

“Videbo animalia!”

Harry had thought Ginny would be something like a bird, like Ron, but was entirely wrong: The animal that appeared was a large tiger, which snarled soundlessly and stuck its paw through a bookshelf before vanishing. Ginny gazed at it, looking extremely happy.

“Great, so I’m a bird and you’re both cats,” muttered Ron. “Being a lion would be so much better...being Gryffindor and all...”

“Give over, Ron. I saw the look on your face.”

“You have the most useful form of any of us,” pointed out Harry. “You can, I don’t know, scout, and you’d be just as good in a fight, and you can fly, you and Hermione.”

Ron looked slightly happier, and as they left, he said, “All right, back to the tattoo parlor. I’m getting one whether you want me to or not.” He hurried away, leaving Hermione still rolling her eyes.

“Tattoos hurt, you know, Ron,” said Harry when he caught up. Dudley had never gotten a tattoo, but had apparently been present when a member of his gang had, and had had a nightmare about needles that night. Harry had been preoccupied with Cedric’s recent death and his quest for information, though not too preoccupied to neglect to tease Dudley about it.

“What are you talking about? Bill has one, Harry. I think he got it here. Mum doesn’t know about it, but I found out about it by accident. He said they just touch their wand to the skin and it appears.”

Harry frowned. “What kind of tattoo does Bill have?”

Ron looked awkward for a moment. “I think he got it before sixth year.” He squirmed for a moment. “Er...don’t tell anyone, Harry, he made me promise not to tell...it’s this heart, and it has ‘Bill’ and ‘Julia’ on it...”

Harry sniggered. “Bet Fleur’s happy about that.”

“I think Bill’s going to try to change it,” said Ron, shrugging. “But Bill said there were all these magical properties you could add to a tattoo. I think he could communicate with Julia through the tattoo.”

“Who is Julia, Ron?” said Hermione from behind them, sharply.

“Some old girlfriend of Bill’s,” said Ginny casually. “She moved to—Italy, wasn’t it, Ron?”

“I think so. Anyway, Harry, Bill got the magical properties disabled, but he can’t get rid of the tattoo.”

“That’s a good reason not to get one, Harry,” said Hermione. “You could never get rid of it. What if you pick something you decide you don’t like a year later?”

“We’re stuck with our animagus forms, too,’ commented Harry. “If we just get those...imagine it, Hermione! Communicating through tattoos? If we were fighting Death Eaters, and got separated, or something...it would be so much easier!”



“Like the dark mark,” murmured Hermione quietly.

“No,” said Harry, turning sharply to face her. “It wouldn’t cause pain, and this is for a good cause!”

“I’m not saying it wouldn’t be good, Harry. Just...” she sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t really like the idea.”

“It can’t be impossible to get a tattoo off, or at least cover it up,” argued Harry, unsure of why he was arguing for this so fiercely now. “It would be useful. Like the coins for the DA in fifth year, only we wouldn’t need to carry them around. Don’t you want to win the war, Hermione?”

It was an odd thing to say, and Harry regretted it when he saw Hermione’s face. “Hermione—”

“No, come on, Harry. We’ll just get the tattoo, if I’m sure it’s hygienic.”

She strode toward the parlor, leaving the three of them behind. Harry shrugged at Ron, who was looking bewildered.

Ten minutes later, he regretted it. He kept his eyes closed. He didn’t want to know what was happening on the skin of his left arm. It felt odd enough, like his skin was a nest of snakes, and they were all twisting around. He could even hear the hissing...

“Just a lion, right?” said the man with the wand pressed to Harry’s skin. By general consent, it had been agreed that they would have their left upper arms tattooed, although the thickly tattooed man running the parlor had warned them that since they would be getting animals, that would only be the place the lion would be seen most. He would roam freely around Harry’s skin. Hermione had paled at this, but the man had quickly shown her a charm that could hide the tattoo.

Harry had been uneasy as they entered the room and were greeted by the man, whose skin was covered in writhing tattoo designs in all colors, all over his body. Ron had bravely volunteered to go first, and Harry had watched in morbid fascination as Ron’s skin had begun

writhing and almost bubbling, reminding Harry of the effects of the Polyjuice Potion in second year. The hawk, which had been identified as a red-tailed hawk by Hermione after looking at the tattoo designs, had appeared after nearly a minute of this, and Ron had turned away the moment he had caught a glimpse of it.

“That’s done, then,” said the man, who was extremely sparing of words. He hadn’t given them a name when they walked in, and they had returned the courtesy.

Harry glanced down at his arm. He could barely see the lion by the shabby lighting in the building, but he had been assured that it would show up better later. It was merely an outline now, like that on his dress robes, and for the most part would stay that way. It shook out its miniature mane and roared silently at him.

Ginny went next, then Hermione, who had her eyes closed even before she sat down. The man then handed them a small booklet of potential spells that could be used on the tattoos, and walked into a back room of the small parlor.

The four of them crowded around the book. Most of the effects seemed fairly useless to Harry, such as the tattoo being able to grow bigger or small at will, or make a sound keyed to certain words spoken. There were a few interesting effects, though.

“Here’s the one Bill had,” said Ron. “You just say the name of the person you want to talk to at the animal, and it lets you communicate.”

“Like a telephone,” commented Harry. Hermione nodded, while Ginny and Ron looked puzzled.

“Can we make it so no one else can hear it?” asked Ginny. “I don’t fancy Ron’s voice suddenly shouting through my arm in a roomful of silent people...”

“Right here,” said Hermione, pointing. “Good idea, Ginny.”

In the end, despite all the other effects Ron wanted, they decided on only the communication one. The man charged them, and Ron and Ginny used the last of their pocket money paying for their tattoos, while Harry and Hermione bought their own—fifteen galleons—feeling slightly awkward.

They went home—or in any case, back to Privet Drive—knowing that they had accomplished something. Ginny took it upon herself to look through the books and find spells that they could possibly find useful in their search, while Hermione finally unveiled her muggle book, which had Harry very interested indeed.

“A dictionary?” said Ron incredulously, staring at Hermione. “Why would we want one of those?”

“Not just any dictionary, Ronald,” said Hermione patiently. “Do you know what language most wizarding spells are based from?”

“No,” said Harry and Ron in unison, grinning at each other.

“Latin,” said Hermione, still trying to make them see, but Harry and Ron still looked at her bemusedly. “This is a Latin dictionary!” she said, exasperated. “We can make up our own spells!”

“How?” said Ron.

“Well, that spell we were using today, *videbo animalia*...” Hermione searched the dictionary for a moment. “The literal translation for that is ‘I will see the animal’. Using this, we can come up with something no one will be expecting.”

“They won’t know any countercurses if they’ve never heard of the spell,” said Harry, the concept dawning on him. “Hermione, what’s the latin word for ‘destroy’?”

She looked it up. “‘*Deletrius*.’ But I’m not sure how—”

“How about ‘Horcrux’?” said Ron, leaning forward eagerly, having clearly thought along the same lines as Harry. Hermione frowned.

“This is a muggle dictionary, guys. Muggles don’t have a word for Horcrux. The closest we could get would be ‘soul’ and I doubt that would work.”

“Worth a try, though,” said Ron thoughtfully.

“Anyways, I’ll try finding something for a new spell.” She tossed the animagus book at Harry. “You two get started on this.”

Harry nodded and opened the book. The first twenty or so pages were drabble about the history of certain great animagi and what they had accomplished, how to find out your animal, and other things

Harry wasn't particularly interested in. One passage caught his eye, though:

Although the animagi is extremely rare, the ability has become much more common in the past decade. This is partly because of growing interest in the art, and partly because of the greatly improved methods for learning the actual transformation. Only in the past year has the incantation been created for actually seeing the animal; in the past, a potential animagi had to meditate regularly for a full year before seeing their animal. The newest record for learning the animagi transformation was set in seventeen hours, by Herbert Mantle...

"Seventeen hours!" said Ron disbelievingly, reading over Harry's shoulder. "How long did it take your dad, Harry?"

"He did have the year of meditation," said Harry defensively. "Besides, how would they measure this guy anyway? He could have been learning on his own for ages before they even started timing him."

"Besides, back then they probably didn't have a handy little book like this to learn from," commented Ginny. "They probably had a hell of a time getting hold of something that could teach them. We're just lucky you two are of age, or that store clerk wouldn't have sold this book to us."

Harry continued to read, skipping to page 80, where the actual instruction began.

Envision the natural habitat for your animal. Imagine yourself inside this habitat, belonging there. Ignore your actual form for the moment. Know that you live in this habitat...

Harry sat back and closed his eyes.

"Seems like a load of mumbo-jumbo to me, mate," commented Ron. "Where do hawks belong? Er...the air..."

Lions...lived in the forest. Didn't they? In the forest, and they ate...antelopes, and gazelles...

"This is really hard," he said, opening his eyes. "I don't know anything about lions. How should I know where they live? Or what their habitats look like?"

"Go do some research," said Hermione, tossing him a book. "It's a magical encyclopedia. I picked it up last summer. You ask it a question; it flips to the page for you. You're a mountain lion, by the way."

"All right..." said Harry, feeling slightly foolish. He eyed the book. "Er...where do mountain lions live?"

The pages flipped quickly, revealing sub-sections Harry knew could never fit into a muggle book of the same size. The pages stopped on a large picture, captioned with the phrase 'a lion's habitat' with a small passage underneath about the eating habits of various types of lions.

There were trees. A lot of them. There were a lot of tall bushes, too, and Harry could see a lion head peering out from behind a fallen log, eyeing a small animal that looked something like a goat. It was fairly dark, as the sky was mostly obscured by the dense foliage above the scene. As Harry watched, the lion jumped out from behind the log and pounced on the goat. He closed the book.

"All right, I have it now." He closed his eyes again. Trees. Bushes. Goats...he belonged here...

the leaves were a vivid green, except where they had browned on the ground, crackling whenever he stepped on them...he had to be careful of that, as not to warn the prey...behind the log...he belonged here...

"Harry? You asleep, mate?"

He opened his eyes to Ron's worried face. "No, you prat, I only had my eyes closed for ten seconds. I almost had it."

"You had your eyes closed for an hour. We thought you were asleep," said Ginny.

"What? An hour?"

"Yeah," said Hermione, looking extremely pleased. "The book says to regularly meditate that way before going on to the next step."

"How did what's-his-name do it in seventeen hours, then?" said Ron incredulously.

Harry shrugged. "We have time. It doesn't matter, as long as we manage this before my birthday."

"That could be hard," said Hermione, frowning. "Just because one person did it in less than a day doesn't mean we can."

"Killjoy," muttered Ron. "Your aunt made supper, Harry. You coming?"

"Sure."

Aunt Petunia had been making their meals for the entire time they had been there, though she had seemed horrified by the amount Ron consumed. Harry didn't understand this, considering Dudley gave Ron a run for his money every night. Harry was surprised Aunt Petunia could buy enough food every day for both of them.

They retired immediately to the room after supper. Hermione had divided it into two parts, one for Harry and Ron and one for Hermione and Ginny, with a cloth barrier separating the two. Despite her attempts, Hermione hadn't been able to produce anything more substantial than thick red cloth.

"Anything from the dictionary, Hermione?" asked Ron casually.

"Here," she said, moving over to sit next to him on the floor. "These are some words I thought might be useful." Harry came over to look at the list as well.

Deleo- to destroy

Verbero- to beat, to strike

Oppugno- to attack

Pulso- to hit, to punch

Vulnero- to wound

Pugno- to fight

Terreo- to terrify, frighten

Cado- to fall

Harry eyed them, and then turned to Hermione. "A bit vicious, some of these."

She shrugged. "We're fighting Death Eaters. They won't exactly hold back, will they?" she had a steely glint in her eye, reminding Harry of when she had convinced them to help her with the Polyjuice Potion in second year, and Harry had to remind himself that Hermione had just as large a capacity for rule-breaking as any of them, she just hid it better. Creating spells had to be illegal, especially ones like these.

"Wow. Didn't know you had this in you, Hermione," said Ron, staring at the list.

"And what is that supposed to mean, Ronald?"

"Just..." he shrugged. "I don't know."

"Hermione, what would some of these do if we said them? I mean, destroy, wound, fall, I understand, but attack and fight? What would happen if we just pointed our wands and said that?"

"You could conjure something," suggested Ginny. "Like a bear, and then send it to attack someone."



Harry winced, remembering a time when he had heard Oppugno used last year. An image appeared in his head of Hermione pointing her wand, and dozens of small yellow birds twittering around Ron's head, pecking at him...

"Yeah...too bad we have nothing we can test some of these on," he commented.

"We could conjure something harmless and use the attack spell on it," suggested Ron. "Like..."

"...a puffskien," suggested Ginny.

"I don't know if I could conjure one," said Hermione, looking worried. "What do they look like?"

"Look for yourself," said Harry, throwing the encyclopedia back at her. She searched through it, muttering.

"All right. I think I have it." She waved her wand, and a small, furry creature that looked something like Arnold appeared. Ron looked at it wistfully.

"I used to have one, you know. Before..."

"Before Fred used it as a bludger, you told us," said Ginny. "I thought it was kind of funny, actually."

"Oppugno!" said Ron loudly, glaring at her. The puffskein scuttled over to her and started to beat her around the face with its tiny, furry paws, sending all four of them into fits of laughter. The puffskien then attempted to bite Ginny, and she held it off, laughing at the sight. This continued for several moments before Hermione got her breath back enough to vanish the creature, since Ron seemed unable to.

"All right, so that works," said Ginny, when they had all stopped laughing. "You could have given me a little warning, Ron."

"Conjure another one," added Harry. "We haven't tried any of these other spells yet."

Ron successfully conjured the puffskien the next time, and they discovered that verbero, pugno, vulnero and pulso were all successful, and Harry's stomach was aching from laughing so hard at the puffskien's sad attempts to hurt them. He had volunteered to be the guinea pig for the next attempt, and couldn't help imagining what it would be like to have an animal that was actually dangerous attempting to hurt him.

They spent the next few hours committing the new spells to memory, and then watching as Hermione, Ginny and Ron each began their meditation for their animagus forms. Ron came out of it after ten minutes, saying he was bored, but Hermione stayed in the meditative state for at least as long as Harry had, according to Ron. Ginny stayed for half an hour, but came out saying she had a cramped leg.

He knew that the day had been well spent as he drifted off to sleep, and wondered what Dumbledore would say tomorrow.

Minerva frowned at the headline of the Daily Prophet that day, shaking her head. The Death Eaters' revels were becoming more plentiful with Albus' death, and three muggle families had been murdered last night. And she still needed a new Defense teacher for next year, despite the fact that only half the students would be returning to Hogwarts.

She looked up at the sound of someone arguing with the gargoyle outside. The small black orb on her desk was enchanted to allow her to hear what was going on outside the gargoyle.

"Just let us in, you stupid rock." That was the irate voice of Ron Weasley, one of the last people she would have expected to hear. He was supposed to be with Harry—or maybe he was...

Her fears were confirmed when she heard the voice of Mr. Potter next. "Listen, we just want to talk to one of the portraits. Or let us talk to Professor McGonagall—she'll let us in..."

"Professor?" that was Miss Granger. "Can you hear us?"

she tapped the orb with her wand, non-verbally causing the gargoyle to allow the three in. She doubted they were Death Eaters in disguise, or they would have found a better way into the office than arguing with the gargoyle.

“Ah, Mr. Potter,” she said as he entered first, followed by three others. “And Miss Granger, and Mr. Weasley, and—Miss Weasley, what are you doing here?”

“I’m with them,” she said, looking nervously defiant.

“We’re here to talk to Dumbledore,” said Harry hesitantly.

“Does Molly know about this?” she asked Ginny pointedly. The girl reddened, but said, “Yes, I left her a note and sent her an owl from Privet Drive. She knows. I’m expecting a howler any day now.”

Albus chuckled from behind her. “By all means, come in. Minerva, I wouldn’t mind talking to the four of them.”

“Professor!” cried Hermione, running forward. “I...” she obviously couldn’t think of what to say.

“You are here about the search, are you not?” said Dumbledore quietly. It hurt Harry to see the old man’s face flattened on the canvas, never able to move further than the few square feet of portrait.

“Yes,” he said hoarsely. “We were wondering if you could tell us how to...how to destroy a Horcrux?” he glanced at McGonagall.

“Minerva knows of the Horcruxes, Harry,” said Dumbledore slowly. “And as for a method for safely destroying Horcruxes...I have not yet come up with one.”

“But you destroyed the ring,” said Harry quickly. “You must have some idea.”

“I’m afraid I didn’t destroy Gaunt’s ring without considerable sacrifice, Harry. I did say to you, I could possibly have had death strike me

even earlier than it did, if not for Madam Pomfrey and Severus Snape.”

“Are you sure some of your injury wasn’t caused by Snape?” snarled Harry. “I mean, after what he did after—”

“Harry!” the portrait spoke sharply, and Harry jerked back. “Professor Snape argued heavily against murdering me. He was prepared to take his own life instead. However, I convinced him that it would be in the best interests of the Order for him to commit the deed.”

“He killed you! You practically are the Order!” shouted Harry angrily. “Don’t tell me everything Snape has done is good for the Order! How has it helped that you’re dead?”

“Snape has been granted a position in Lord Voldemort’s inner circle, Harry,” said McGonagall, speaking up for the first time. “He is privy to every plan the Dark Lord constructs. No one was informed of the plan until after Albus died, when his portrait informed me. No one, Mr. Potter.”

“We have a great source of information now, Harry,” continued Dumbledore. “If Severus had been in this position years ago, we would have been informed of the Triwizard Tournament plan, of the dreams planted regarding Sirius—”

“How do you know he didn’t know about that already?” spat Harry. “He was probably already in the inner circle.”

“Professor, wasn’t there an option that could have gotten Snape into the inner circle without him murdering Dumbledore?” said Ron, with only slightly less venom in his voice than Harry.

“Severus made an Unbreakable Vow, Mr. Weasley. You of all people should know what these imply, coming from a pure-blood wizarding family.”

“What was the Vow, Professor?” said Hermione. Harry assumed that she had read about the vow and knew what it was. He had only a faint idea, from what Ron had told him last year.

“Severus vowed with Narcissa Malfoy to complete her son’s task if Draco was unable to.”

“And he wasn’t, the coward,” growled Harry.

“We believe that Severus has Draco well on the way to becoming a double agent, in the same position as Severus,” said McGonagall. “He has been decorated with high honors for being able to let Lord Voldemort’s army into Hogwarts, but I believe you saw his hesitation, Harry, regarding the Headmaster. We believe we may be able to have him passing information by next year.”

“He’ll never turn,” said Harry. “The little scum—”

“I believe that that was your father’s attitude about Severus as well, Harry,” said the portrait sharply. “I believe that you deserve to know what happened, but I will hear no more about it. You came here regarding Horcruxes.”

“Professor, I would sacrifice a hand to destroy part of Voldemort’s soul,” said Hermione quietly. Harry turned to stare at her, and Dumbledore’s portrait eyes twinkled.

“I’m sorry, Miss Granger. The method I employed to destroy the ring not only tainted my hand, but removed a portion of my magical powers as well.”

“I wouldn’t let you do that to yourself anyway,” said Ron strongly.

“That’s...awful,” Hermione whispered. “It took some of your magical powers away?”

“I believe that if a person were to destroy three of these Horcruxes the same way I attempted, they would be reduced to the magical ability of a squib. And it takes a great deal of power to begin the spell in the first place. Each of you could likely only manage one Horcrux before your magical powers were removed completely.”

Silence descended. After several moments Hermione said hopefully, "Did you have any leads on how to destroy one without harming yourself?"

The portrait sighed. "There was a method, long ago. I believe I owned a book which contained it. Alas, Lord Voldemort managed to destroy it in one of his forays into my office."

Ron perked up. "Were there copies?"

"No."

Harry frowned. "Could we...go back in time, or..." he thought for a moment.

"No." it was Hermione who spoke. "There are no time turners left in the Ministry, remember, Harry?"

"And you would have some difficulty getting back," said Dumbledore. "No way has been invented for going forward in time."

"Spin the time turner backwards?" said Ron. Hermione snorted.

"There is one other method for finding the book," said Dumbledore, looking thoughtful.

"What?" said all three at once.

"Well, Mr. Potter, have you ever heard the phrase 'alternate dimension'?" Hermione gasped. Harry shook his head.

"I'll let Miss Granger explain it to you."

"Another universe," said Hermione excitedly. "Where something happened differently in the past, so it branched out, and the world is different...I guess the different thing would be that the book was never destroyed..."

"Portals have been found to other worlds," said Dumbledore. "There is, in fact, one in the Forbidden Forest on the grounds here."

"Let's go," said Ron, standing. Dumbledore chuckled.

"Not as easy as you think, Mr. Weasley. A portal may only open once every century. However, I believe that this one opens, perhaps, every six years, and is due this year again."

"It opens every six years and you're telling me no student has ever encountered it?" said Harry disbelievingly.

"In the summer, Harry. Not many students reside here in the summer, you may notice. You have been out in the school halls?"

"We Flooed to the Great Hall from Mrs. Figg's house," said Harry. "No one was here but the teachers...do any of them know about this portal?"

"Several, I believe, including Hagrid. He prowls the forest enough that he knows about the mysterious hole in the air that occasionally pulls a centaur in. Centaurs are extremely sensitive to this sort of thing."

"I believe it," muttered Harry. "So...we would have to wait here for it to open, with our things packed?"

"Not so drastic as that, Mr. Potter. Being packed is a good precaution to take, but I believe Professor Hagrid would be happy to stake out the portal site for you, and send a message when it opens, which, from records, I believe should be around mid-August."

"All right," said Harry, thinking furiously. "So we can go to this other world. We have some time to train, we won't miss Bill's wedding...it's perfect."

"Professor, do we have to wait six years to get back?" Hermione asked. Harry stopped in mid-thought. He hadn't thought of that.

"I believe not, Miss Granger. Once you have gone through, the portal will not close until you are back where you belong. And there is, of course, a minimum amount of time you must spend there. A month, I believe. But you must remember: Nothing can come back with you.

Not people, not animals, not even clothing. No matter how much you want to bring something with you, it will not come. Only you three may come back."

Harry shrugged, but Hermione saw the complication almost immediately. "Something else could be different, couldn't it, Professor."

Dumbledore nodded at McGonagall, who pulled one of the silver instruments on the desk closer and tapped it with her wand. She stared at the air in front of her for several moments while Harry, Ron and Hermione waited tensely. Finally her eyes refocused. She sighed.

"Yes indeed, Miss Granger. Things will be different." She looked directly at Harry. "When Lord Voldemort heard the beginning of the prophecy, he made a different decision. Harry, if you choose to go to this universe, prepare yourself. The Boy-Who-Lived won't be you."



Harry sat back. "So I was raised by Sirius after my parents died. And Neville will be the Boy-Who-Lived. But it won't matter. We can just go in there and get out with the book, right?"

"It isn't that simple. You will need to stay for at least two full months. That is how the portal works. And you cannot stay for more than a year."

"That's fine. Professor, just tell us where the book was, we'll go there and get it and come right back."

Hermione sighed, exasperated. "Harry, haven't you been listening? Things change. This book could be anywhere. All we know is that it still exists in that universe. All we can do is go there and look for it. And we need to be well-trained for that. That's all we can do. Be prepared."

"On that note," said Professor Dumbledore. "Minerva, would you bring the sword?" Professor McGonagall strode away and returned a moment later, a very familiar object in her hand.

"The sword of Gryffindor is yours by right, Mr. Potter. As training goes, this could help you immensely." Harry took the sword from her hand, staring at it.

"How could it help?"

"There is nothing that can block an unforgivable," said Dumbledore calmly. "Nothing, that is, except for a solid object. The sword of Gryffindor can take the full blast of a killing curse, or any other spell, for that matter, and hold firm. Keep it with you, Harry. It is much easier to simply hold up a sword you are already holding than to conjure a stone wall to block every unforgivable sent at you."

Harry studied the sword. "But this can't be more than two inches across," he protested. "I can't just hold it up in front of a spell and expect to catch it."

"That's where training comes in, Mr. Potter. I know you have good hand-eye coordination. So do you, from Quidditch. Keep the sword

with you. You may discover it has more abilities than just the one to absorb spells. I will set Hagrid to staking out the portal. Be ready. We may summon you at any time.”

Harry blinked, startled by the quick dismissal. “We might come back, Professor.”

“You are always welcome, I’m sure,” said Professor McGonagall, waving an arm. “Feel free to use my floo.”

“All right, Harry. I’m just going to send a basic stunner at you, and you try to block it with the sword.” Harry nodded.

They were standing in his room again, which had been magically expanded. Ron had grudgingly cast a silencing spell around the room, although he and Harry both thought it would be rather amusing for the Dursleys to be constantly startled by loud banging coming from the room.

“Stupefy!”

Harry jerked the sword up. The stunner hit him in the chest, and everything went black. He opened his eyes to Ron’s worried face.

“Conjured some cushions just in time, mate.” He helped Harry up. “We’re going to start with a jinx that doesn’t knock you out. Petrificus, probably.”

Harry picked up the sword again determinedly. It was surprisingly heavy. “Hermione, is there some way to make this lighter?” he called. She walked over and took the sword from him.

“Oh. I see what you mean.” She consulted the Latin dictionary for a moment, muttered something over the sword, and handed it back to Harry.

“Wow,” he said. “Like holding a feather. Can it still even cut something?”

Ron conjured a cushion and tossed it at him. Harry sliced through it in a scything motion.

“Yeah,” said Ron loudly as feathers fell around them. “I’d say it could still cut.”

“Petrificus!” called Hermione unexpectedly. Harry tried to swing the sword around in time, but didn’t quite manage it, and his legs stuck together. Hermione muttered the counter curse.

“You need to be ready at all times, Harry,” she said reprimandingly.

“Constant Vigilance!” called Ginny jokingly from the corner, where she was reading one of the spellbooks. Harry laughed.

“Okay. Do that to me at random times. I’m going to drag this thing everywhere,” he said, sliding it into his belt. “I’ll need a better way to hide it.”

“Disillusionment charm,” suggested Hermione. She took the sword again and knocked on it, and Harry frowned as it disappeared.

“I’ll need some way to know where it is. How else can I block spells?”

Ron was already consulting the Latin dictionary. “You say ‘gladii’” he called. “That means sword.”

Harry picked up the sword. “Gladii!” it became visible. “Was that underage magic?”

Hermione frowned. “I don’t know. It isn’t as if you had your wand in your hand. And it isn’t exactly a real spell. I guess we just have to wait for a letter. In the meantime...petrificus!” Harry was ready this time, and swung the sword up. The spell hit it full on, the red light vanishing. Ginny applauded.

“Now we just need me to be able to do that all the time,” muttered Harry. “I swear, that was luck.”

“Do you mind if I go get a snack, Harry?” said Ron. Harry snorted. He knew Ron just wanted to terrify the Dursleys.

“Help yourself. It isn’t like it’s my house.”

“Thanks, mate.” Ron turned around right near the door. “Petrificus!” Harry brought the sword up, but missed. The spell caught him and froze him from the waist down.

Hermione cast the counter curse, and Harry sat down. “All the time,” he muttered. “Don’t do it to me in my sleep, please.” Ginny giggled.

Ron returned after a moment, frowning slightly and holding what looked like an entire loaf of bread and an entire wedge of cheese. “Something weird on the visitelly down there,” he commented.

“Television,” chorused Harry and Hermione. Ron rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, that. It was just like this,” he indicated the sword. “Well, not just like it. The swords were glowing, and muggles were shooting at other muggles with those metal wands, and they would block with these glowing swords...”

Harry was nonplussed, but Hermione understood after another minute of ineffectual explanation. “Star Wars. Have you ever seen it, Harry? Ron, you must have seen one of the scenes with Light Sabers. It is kind of like that, actually.”

“They were doing it so fast,” added Ron. “Just waving them around effortlessly, and blocking all the red lights. It looked so easy.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “It’s called acting, Ron. None of that is real, you know.”

Harry barely listened as they began another endless argument. He had caught bits and pieces of various Star Wars movies in his years with the Dursleys, although never a full movie; he was always chased out eventually. He had seen the fight scenes, though, and Ron was right. They were quite similar...

They each performed their meditation that night, this time two at a time. Harry and Hermione took the same amount of time. Both Ron and Ginny managed an hour that night, though Ron came out of it five minutes before Ginny.

They stayed in the house for the next few days, concentrating on selecting spells to learn, their animagus transformation, and Harry's abilities with the sword. After the first day, he learned to always have a hand free to grab the sword. Ron in particular was fond of attempting to hex him during meal times.

In their actual practice dueling sessions, though Harry was still not allowed to cast spells, Ron and Hermione began moving around him, seeing if he was able to protect himself from several cast spells at once. Harry improved quickly at this; he did have good coordination with his hands because of Quidditch.

By the second week of July, they were well ready to leave the house. They packed their bags, prepared for Bill's wedding on the 19th. None of them had an active part in the wedding, but Harry was looking forward to it anyways.

They had begun receiving the Daily Prophet, which wasn't particularly accurate, but at least managed to communicate what was going on in the Wizarding world. The headlines were grim notifications of various nasty things that Voldemort's followers were doing in both the muggle and wizarding world, but one headline made Hermione squeal at breakfast and spit orange juice on the paper. Harry grabbed the paper, fearing the worst, but:

MAGIC USE AUTHORIZED FOR ANY OVER 14 IN WIZARDING WORLD

Ron took the paper from him. "Wicked, mate," he said, scanning the article. "In times of danger...war calls for desperate measures...bunch of other bullocks. We can start on the real training now, Harry! Petrificus!"

Without thinking, Harry drew the sword. "Gladii!" he blocked the spell, then the stupefy that Hermione sent from the other end of the table

moments after. Aunt Petunia was staring at him, horrified, while Dudley looked torn between awe and terror.

"I can do that to you too now, Harry," said Ginny brightly, hurrying upstairs, to grab her wand, Harry presumed.

Uncle Vernon was purpling again. "You may have permission to have you friends in my household, Potter, but you may absolutely not have a weapon! Especially not at the table!"

Harry shrugged, not particularly caring and elated at his success at blocking the spells without actually chopping the table apart. "We're leaving today anyways." Uncle Vernon looked amazed, and did his best not to look ecstatic, though failing.

"We're leaving, Harry?" said Hermione. "Today?"

"We'll take the Knight Bus," said Harry. "If you want to leave today. I mean, Bill's wedding is in about a week..."

"It's a great idea, mate," said Ron, his mouth full. "Ginny won't mind if we're there too..." they got up from the table and went upstairs together, where Ginny was waiting behind the door. "Stupefy!" Harry blocked the spell.

"Better keep that disillusioned on the bus," said Hermione. "Here, I'll show you the spell."

It took a mere moment for Harry to learn the Disillusionment Charm. In his opinion it was no harder than a third-year spell. He wondered why they hadn't learned it at Hogwarts yet. The professors probably couldn't handle students that could make themselves invisible at all times; Harry had only to think of the trouble Fred and George could have caused.

Ginny bustled around, getting their things ready and reminding Harry of Molly more than anything. "Harry? I was wondering about this, but I forgot."

Harry looked up from his trunk. "Yeah?"

"These shield cloaks...they're good and all, but they're black. People wouldn't be able to tell us from the Death Eaters."

Harry frowned. "We won't be wearing masks..."

"She's right, Harry," said Hermione, frowning. "We need something to distinguish us. One black cloak is just like any other in a fight."

"We'll go to Madam Malkins," said Harry. "She can, I don't know, put something on there like the dragon on Ron's dress robes..."

"You mean embroidery?" said Ginny amusedly. "That could work. What would it be?"

"Our animagus forms," said Harry thoughtfully. "We can just stop by there on the way to the Burrow."

They had moved on to the second step of the animagus transformation that night; actually imagining themselves as the animal. Harry had been able to do it effortlessly. He could practically feel the mane, feel the claws on his paws...

"I'm packed," Ron announced. "Harry, you should probably start..."

"What?" said Harry. "Oh..." he eyed his half-full trunk, then waved his wand in the sweeping motion he remembered Tonks using in the summer before fifth year. Around the room, everyone's hair went static.

"Harry? Was that supposed to do something?" said Ginny, folding her arms. Harry tried to say what he had been doing, but couldn't manage it through his laughter.

"You want embroidery on these?" Madam Malkin looked at the cloaks expertly. "Well, animals are easy enough to do, but we're quite busy at the moment. I can get them back to you in about two weeks."

"You weren't busy at all a few weeks ago," said Hermione, frowning.

“All we needed to do was measure you, dear. We had the robes already made. They just needed to be slightly altered.”

“How much would it cost to have them done by tomorrow?”

Madam Malkin frowned at him. “Thirty Galleons, Mr. Potter. There are quite a few people waiting for robes right now. We’re doing it as a mail order, now that people are afraid to leave their homes.”

“Here.” Harry reached into his Gringotts bag, counting out thirty Galleons. “By tomorrow. We’ll be back.”

“Harry, you don’t need to do that,” said Hermione.

Harry shrugged. “Consider it an early birthday present. We need these. You know we do. We need to be prepared.”

None of the others could argue with that statement.

“Stupefy!”

The moment he walked into the Weasley’s yard, he was ready. Ginny had gone on ahead on the Knight Bus so that Harry, Ron and Hermione could Apparate. Hermione hadn’t worried much that Harry didn’t have his license; he had been able to do it better than Ron in practice sessions

“Ginny!” came the scolding voice of Molly Weasley as he blocked the spell. “What—oh my...what is that, Harry?” she stared at the sword for a moment, then looked at the three of them. “Tell me something about you, all of you.”

Harry opened his mouth to ask what she meant, but Ron stopped him by saying patiently, “My middle name is Bilius. I got seven OWLs.” He rolled his eyes at Harry.

“I got twelve OWLs, all Outstanding except one E in Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said Hermione, catching on. Harry realized what was going on too; he remembered Dumbledore telling him his favorite jam flavor...



"I gave Fred and George the money to start their shop," said Harry, as it was the only thing he could think of at the moment. Well, not exactly the only thing, but he didn't want to mention the name "Mollywobbles"...

At that moment, Fred appeared in the doorway of the house. "Harry! How're the cloaks?"

Harry shrugged. "Pretty good. We haven't found anything that gets by them yet."

"We're getting them embroidered," added Ginny.

"Embroidered?" Fred frowned. "Why?"

"They're too black. People won't be able to tell."

Fred shrugged. "Suit yourself. They're reversible, though, so if you ever want to be inconspicuous..."

At that point Molly halted further conversation by enveloping the three of them in a huge hug. Then she pulled back, and began the inevitable questioning.

"How were the muggles? Ginny won't tell me anything. Oh, I hope you didn't destroy their house too much, or terrify them..." she led them toward the house. Harry levitated their trunks as they followed.

"Why are you here, anyway?" he said to Fred as he passed. "I thought you were avoiding this place at all costs."

Fred rolled his eyes. "Showing flower options to the bride. I didn't know roses came in different colors besides red and white, but apparently she must have yellow, zey go wiz ze dress robes..."

Harry and Ron laughed as they went into the house. The kitchen was full of flowers and Weasleys. Several people who looked to be Fleur's family were also present, including...

“Arry!” Gabrielle Delacour swooped down on him and kissed him on the cheek. “Mrs Weasley did not say you were coming ‘ere!”

“Yes...Gabrielle...” Harry freed himself from her hug. “How are you?” he asked awkwardly. She was very pretty; like a miniature version of Fleur.

Gabrielle began to talk, but Ginny grabbed Harry’s hand and dragged him away, saying, “Time to unpack, Harry. I’ll help.” He noticed a blush staining her cheeks.

She dragged him up to her bedroom then turned to face him.

“That was kind of...rude, Ginny,” said Harry, unsure of whether this was the right word. “She just wanted to talk...”

“She’s ‘just wanted to talk’ to every other boy in the household. Then when you think she’s just innocently talking...she pounces!”

“Huh?”

Ginny sighed. “She was on the couch talking with George the last day I was here, and then suddenly she started snogging him. I think he was almost as surprised as me. She doesn’t even give you a warning!”

“What’s wrong with that?” said Harry, still a bit confused.

Ginny sighed. “Harry...I know we broke up. But listen, I told you I’m not giving up on you, and I’m not. I waited five years before you asked me out. I can wait out your search. I’ll help you as much as you can. But you have to understand...” she bit her lip and stared at him, as if searching for the right words. “I’m not going to stand by and watch other girls snog you.” She smiled a bit. “Whether you see it coming or not.”

“Right,” said Harry, deciding to leave this for another day.

“Stupefy!”

He brought the sword up out of reflex, but missed the spell.

"Harry, Harry, I'm sorry..." it was Hermione's voice. The world came back into focus. "You hadn't missed one for a week, I didn't know you two were having a private conversation..."

"It's fine, Hermione," said Harry, sitting up. His head ached. "What happened?"

"You...fell back and hit the bedpost. Nothing bad, but I think you might have a bit of a bruise. I don't know any healing spells, but Mrs. Weasley can probably help with that. I'm sorry, Harry..."

"It's all right!" said Harry, irritated. "It's nothing Mrs. Weasley can't fix, right? Let's go down there now."

The week passed in a frenzy of wedding preparations. Harry was treated to an interrogation about Gryffindor's sword, and then a lecture from Mrs. Weasley about going to Hogwarts without telling her. This, in turn, made Ron nervous about telling her what they were going to do after the wedding.

The day before the wedding, they sat in Ron's room, which they were sharing. Hermione and Ginny were also there, reading Witch Weekly on the bed. "Just tell her, Ron," Harry advised. "You're of age now, she can't stop you."

"She can...I don't know...tell me I can't come to the wedding or something. She'll yell at me in front of the whole house, and all those Veela..."

"They're not all Veela," said Harry. "There's only one, and she doesn't come up from the Leaky Cauldron anyway, and she's seventy. Don't worry about it." Most of Fleur's family were staying at the Leaky Cauldron, and flooing over to the Burrow every day. The house was still crowded, though.

Ron took a deep breath. "I'm going to tell her." He stood up, and Harry moved to follow, but Ron said, "Don't come. I don't want you to watch her tear me apart."

Harry shrugged and sat back down. Ron visibly steeled himself and headed downstairs. Harry waited.

A moment later, the telltale “WHAT?” came, and Harry got up and went downstairs, thinking Ron might need his help. Not that he could think of anything he could do against the Weasley matriarch.

Ron had at least gotten Mrs. Weasley into an empty room, although the rest of the family and, indeed, the Veela in the rest of the house looked rather surprised. Harry entered the kitchen hesitantly.

“I can’t tell you why, mum! It has to do with You-Know-Who, and I told Harry that I wouldn’t tell!”

“Ronald Weasley, you had better have a good reason! And you are not going off the God knows where without telling me what you are looking for! I forbid it!”

“Do you know what a Horcrux is, Mrs. Weasley?” Harry leaned against the counter. Mrs. Weasley shook her head mutely, glaring at Ron. Ron, in turn, glared at Harry.

“It’s a part of a soul, Mrs. Weasley. Something a person can keep in an object, that keeps them alive. Immortal. You have to kill someone to do it.”

Molly stared at him, forgetting to glare at Ron.

“Voldemort has six. This is a secret, Mrs. Weasley. Very few people know, and it can’t get out to Voldemort that we know about his Horcruxes. We have to track them down and destroy them. I need Ron and Hermione for that. Can you let him go, please? For the sake of the Wizarding world?”

Molly’s mouth had dropped open. “Six?” she breathed. Then she pulled herself together. “You could have told me that at the beginning, Ronald!” she smiled at Harry. “You may go, but I expect you back here as much as possible. And letters, of course.”

“That might not be possible, Mrs. Weasley,” said Harry apologetically.

Mrs. Weasley began to get angry again. “And why is that?”

“The horcruxes could be anywhere, mum,” said Ron. “Anywhere in the world. You can’t floo internationally without paying hundred of Galleons...”

Harry hadn’t known that, but said nothing. Mrs. Weasley looked from him to Ron, then said tightly, “Fine, then. If you can’t. But you come out of this well, please.” She turned and left the kitchen without another word.

"You don't always have to handle things for me, you know."

Harry glanced at Ron. They had stayed in the kitchen for the moment.  
"What?"

"You didn't need to come down. I told you not to. I could have handled that myself."

Harry rather thought he couldn't have, but shrugged. "I forgot to say you could tell her about the Horcruxes."

"I still could have done it myself, even without telling her about the Horcruxes. I've been dealing with my mum for ten years longer than you, Harry. I know how to handle her." He looked almost sullen.

"What's this about, Ron?" said Harry, frowning. "I thought you were joking when you said you didn't want me to come. It didn't look like she was tearing you apart."

Ron shrugged, and walked out of the room.

Harry followed, but Ron had gone outside. He climbed the stairs and entered the room, greeting Hermione and Ginny and telling them that Ron had gotten permission. He then recounted the conversation that had followed.

"I don't get why he's mad," he admitted awkwardly. The two girls stared at him.

"He's probably a bit embarrassed," said Hermione finally. "That you handled his mum better than he did."

"He's been kind of like that all summer," put in Ginny. "When we went to your vault, too. When his ears go red it's like a warning sign. You have more money than him and you're better at handling mum. He's jealous," she finished bluntly.

"But...Hermione's better than him at loads of things!" protested Harry.  
"Better than me, too!" Hermione blushed pink at the compliment.

“Those are sore spots for him, Harry,” said Ginny. “He knows he was never the greatest at schoolwork, and he never had that much money, and he made the quidditch team four years later than you, but he thought he was at least better at handling Molly Weasley.”

“He probably is,” Harry protested. “He just didn’t know that he could tell her about the Horcruxes.”

“You didn’t tell her about this alternate world thing, did you?” said Ginny. Harry blinked at the sudden change in subject.

“No, Ron just said we wouldn’t be able to keep in contact a lot of the time. Why does it matter?”

“Harry, there is no way she would let you go if she heard about that,” said Ginny, sounding exasperated. “Mum doesn’t handle new things well. An entirely different world would be a nasty thing for her to understand. She definitely wouldn’t let you go.”

“That’s not really fair to your mum, Ginny,” Hermione protested. “You don’t know what she would say until you asked her.”

“But if she’s all right with it and doesn’t expect letters, don’t tell her.” Ginny added. “Why don’t you go find Ron, Harry? It’s almost suppertime.”

Harry shrugged. He wasn’t all that keen on finding Ron at all. Ginny seemed to be implying that Harry should apologize, though what for he had no idea. He hadn’t exactly done anything wrong.

The day of the wedding dawned sunny. The actual wedding would be taking place at a small meadow near the Burrow. The elder Weasleys had apparently been working for days setting up wards and muggle-repelling charms around the area to make it safe. Ginny told Harry that Dumbledore hadn’t been keen at all on an outdoor wedding, as it would make them a great deal more vulnerable, but Bill and Fleur had insisted.

Ron had returned the night before acting as if nothing had gone wrong, but Harry was worried about what Ginny had told him. He had

known for years that Ron easily got jealous when it came to money, but Harry had thought he was over that when he made no fuss about Harry paying for the embroidery on their cloaks.

They woke bright and early to the sound of Molly bustling around, still preparing the wedding feast. She had been working on it all the day before, as well; Harry had, in fact, been surprised that all three of them could fit in the kitchen with all the snacks, meats, cheeses, salads, cakes and candies. He hadn't seen a wedding cake; apparently Molly was having it done professionally. Harry thought this was quite unlike her, but he supposed she was slightly overwhelmed by all the work she had taken on.

Molly had looked over and approved of their dress robes earlier that week, so he and Ron put them on. Harry made a small attempt at combing his hair flat, but failed dismally, the mirror laughing at him and telling him that it was no use.

The morning passed in a blur of preparations. He and Ron got the duty of levitating the entire feast over to the wedding site. Ron grumbled, but Harry didn't mind; he needed to get away from the house and Ginny and Gabrielle in their pale gold dress robes.

The wedding site was actually quite beautiful. It was a vividly green meadow beside a lake. Chairs were set up on either side of an aisle which had been laid down on the ground in golden bricks, which Harry supposed matched the dress robes. The flowers Fred and George had supplied were everywhere, floating in vases all around. Something had been done to the grass to keep it dry from the lake water and cushiony. There were trees scattered around the site, giving it an overall natural and peaceful air.

He and Ron set up the food on a long table, which was a little way away from the aisle, beside the dance floor. Bill had told them proudly that he had managed to book the Weird Sisters; Molly, who had wanted Celestina Warbeck, had frowned but said nothing.

Bored, they went back to the house to grab their brooms, only to have Molly tell them sternly that they would mess up their nice dress robes. Fleur was still closeted in her room; Bill was nervously eating a



banana in the kitchen, every now and then wiping his sweaty hands on his robes. It was an interesting experience to see Bill nervous; Harry hadn't thought that he was capable of nervousness.

They made some more preparations. Harry straightened his dress robes and thrust the sword of Gryffindor through the belt, more for show than anything else. Ginny had informed him that the robes and sword looked "dashing" together. It actually felt slightly odd to have the sword off after wearing it constantly for weeks.

Molly sent them back to the wedding site as guests began to drift in. A huge quantity of redheads filled up one side of the aisle, while the rest of the chairs were filled with a large quantity of stunningly beautiful or handsome Delacours. Harry and Ron took their seats in the third row, second and third from the left—Molly had been very insistent—and watched as various order members drifted in and began to fill up the back rows.

"Wotcher, Harry. Nice dress robes," said a voice, and Harry looked behind him to see Tonks' face under a thick mop of red hair.

"I thought I would conform," she said at his questioning look. "I'm not really here for the wedding—well, I got invited, but Minerva assigned me guard duty..." she sighed. "I doubt anything is going to happen. Bill has this place too well warded. I wish Remus were here."

"Oh," said Harry, not sure how to react. He knew Remus and Tonks were seeing each other, but not quite how to act with this fact. "Yeah, I don't see Voldemort coming to a wedding," he said, ignoring the wince this produced. Ron had struck up a conversation with another redhead on the far right.

"I don't mind, really," said Tonks, shrugging. "Anything to see the Weird Sisters, really. I wanted to go to Hogwarts during the Triwizard Tournament, but I couldn't get the day off. And they said they didn't want any aurors there, causing panic. I could have looked like a student if I wanted!" Harry laughed.

He talked to Tonks for a few more minutes, and then Kingsley as the tall black man came around. Half an hour later, silence finally reigned.

Ron nudged Harry hard, his mouth open wide. Harry looked at the aisle, vaguely noting that Hermione was sitting in the back beside Tonks.

Fleur almost seemed to be glowing. Her hair was done up beautifully, with just a few strands falling around her face. Her wedding dress was a white reminiscent of the unicorn Harry remembered seeing in Care of Magical Creatures in fourth year. It was trimmed with golden roses along the front.

Harry's gaze was torn away from Fleur and at Ginny, who looked truly radiant.

"Shut your mouth, mate," Ron muttered quietly, as Harry continued to stare at Ginny. Gabriella, beside her, looked stunning, but he couldn't stop staring at Ginny's red hair, falling over her shoulders in perfect ringlets, and her pale golden dress, highlighting her perfect form.

She hadn't put on any makeup, or had her hair done up, that morning. He couldn't remember her dress looking like that either.

"We are gathered here today to witness the union of two amazing people..."

Harry didn't recognize the small white-haired man who was speaking, but he didn't care. He made eye contact with Ginny, and she smiled hesitantly, and he couldn't stop smiling back, even after she had looked away.

"You look...amazing."

The ceremony was over, as was the main meal. Harry had never been to a wedding before, and had found quite a bit of it rather boring, although not the speeches made by Fleur and Bill. But he was glad he could get those words out now, to Ginny, at the refreshments table.

"Thanks, Harry," she said, smiling. He loaded her plate with a bit of the wedding cake, as well as his own, and they made their way back

to their table, which was shared by Ron, Hermione, Fred and George. It didn't escape Harry that Ron and Hermione were holding hands.

"That was beautiful," Hermione was saying. "It wasn't that different than a muggle wedding, actually. I kind of expected it to be."

Ron's mouth was already full of wedding cake, but he appeared to be listening.

"I've never seen a muggle wedding," said Harry, sitting down. "What's different?"

"Oh, you thought the white glow when they exchanged rings was normal, was it?" said Hermione amusedly.

"It bonds them," said Ron, swallowing. "Neither can be unfaithful to the other, or something. It does something else, too, but I don't think you're allowed to know until you're engaged."

"If they knew it, no one would get engaged," said Fred, surfacing from his whispered conversation with George.

"Why?" Harry and Ginny chorused.

"It makes it so that when one of you dies, the other is rendered unable too...you know," said George completely seriously.

"Yeah right," said Ron, rolling his eyes. "That's bollocks."

"You might think so," chorused the twins, cracking identical grins.

"Ooh, the Weird Sisters are here," said Ginny. "Hermione, come with me, I want to get an autograph..." the two girls meandered off through the tables in the direction of the band, who were using their wands to set up their equipment.

"Girls," said Ron, shaking his head.

"You always wanted an autograph from Viktor Krum," retorted Harry. "Are you going to ask Hermione to dance?"

“Ah...” Ron looked awkward for a moment. “Should I?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “I bet she’s waiting for it.”

“I don’t know how to dance.”

“Yes you do. I know you danced half a dance with Padma before you sat down. I saw you.”

“But she did everything!” protested Ron. Harry frowned. Come to think of it, so had Parvati, at the ball.

A moment passed for the two of them in quiet contemplation of the horrors of dancing when Ginny and Hermione returned. “Come on! They’re starting!” Ginny said, sounding excited.

“Did you get your autograph?” said Ron, sounding like he didn’t really care. He was looking nervously at Hermione.

“Yeah,” said Ginny, blushing slightly.

“One of them told her she was a gorgeous young woman,” said Hermione, laughing. “It was kind of weird, coming from a hairy older woman, but I guess you should take compliments where you get them...”

Ginny reddened even more as they stood and headed over to the dance floor, where Bill and Fleur were beginning a slow waltz.

“Oh, that’s beautiful,” whispered Hermione, watching as the couple moved slowly around the empty dance floor.

Ron now looked positively terrified, and Harry knew he was steeling himself for the moment he would be obligated to ask Hermione to dance.

“What’s wrong with Ron?” Ginny muttered in Harry’s ear. “He looks like he’s constipated.”

“He’s just nervous,” Harry whispered back. “I told him he should ask Hermione to dance. He said he would. I think he’s regretting it now, actually.”

Ginny giggled, then whispered, “And who are you going to ask to dance, Mr. Potter? Gabrielle?”

Harry frowned. “Actually, I was thinking you.” The words just popped out. He had, of course, been thinking about dancing with Ginny, but now that they were officially split up, were they still allowed to dance?

Ginny appeared to have been following his train of thought. “We’re allowed to dance, Harry,” she said softly. “As friends, of course. I’m not going to lie and say I don’t want more than that, but I understand your reasons.”

The waltz had ended, and a faster song was beginning. Ginny grabbed Harry’s hand and led him onto the dance floor.

The song passed in a flash of loud music and movement. Harry didn’t have much of an idea how to dance, so he just imitated what he was seeing from the males around him, and it seemed to work. Ginny appeared to know exactly what she was doing, and she was smiling happily at him the whole time.

He didn’t know how long he stayed on the dance floor. Not all of his dances were with Ginny; he bravely stepped off the floor and asked Molly Weasley for a dance at one point, as well as several of Fleur’s relatives, and, much to Ginny’s displeasure, one dance with Gabrielle, who kept trying to get close to him and making him glad he had chosen a faster tune to dance to her with. He even managed one dance with Fleur, although Bill was giving anyone dancing with his new wife warning looks, which were somewhat terrifying with his still scarred face.

He and Ginny stopped for a break near midnight, and Ginny pointed out that Fred and George were sneaking off near the lake.

“What’s the betting that they come up with something involving that lake and my brother?” she asked Harry, giggling. “Bill will kill them.”

"I bet they can pull something off, though," said Harry, watching the dance floor. Ron and Hermione were slow dancing right in the middle, staring into each other's eyes. "Actually, do you want to find out? We can go back to the house to get my cloak, if you want."

Ginny glanced at the darkening sky. "Sure. Let's be quick, though. Whatever they're planning, they'll do it soon."

They headed away from the wedding site, the music and lights getting fainter. The Burrow was only about a mile away, and as they got nearer, Harry got the feeling that something was not right.

"There's someone there," he whispered as quietly as he could to Ginny. "Did anyone stay at the house?"

"No," she whispered back. "I know a back way in, though." She led them around the house to a door that Harry hadn't known was there, and they made their way silently in. There was a dark figure in the kitchen. Ginny opened her mouth to speak, no doubt to ask who it was, but Harry put his hand over her mouth and pulled her past the kitchen and up the stairs.

"Shield cloaks," he whispered, leading her into his and Ron's room, where he had carelessly thrown the robes after getting them from Madam Malkin the week before. He slipped on his own, as Ginny did so as well, and then froze. Someone was coming up the stairs. He dove behind the bed, Ginny following quickly.

There were two of them, dark-robed figures. The voices were unfamiliar, but who they were was unmistakable.

"Just destroy Potter's things? Not go after him?" the voice was petulant and sounded young, maybe only a few years out of Hogwarts.

"The place is protected too well for us to get in. No authorized person can get in through those wards. Do you want to attack a wedding full of aurors with only two of us?" this voice was bitingly sarcastic, and also unrecognizable.

“Well, which one is his trunk?”

“Just get rid of them all. I don’t know what the Dark Lord thinks is important in here, but—”

“Stupefy!” Ginny had stood up, and was pointing her wand at the older man. He put up a shield immediately, and Harry couldn’t help but be impressed with his reflexes. He must have been an auror at some point.

“What’s this?” the younger sneered, eyeing Harry and Ginny. Harry didn’t recognize his face, even without a Death Eater mask.

Harry didn’t wait for the witty repartee. “Expelliarmus!”

“Protego! Crucio!” and Ginny was writhing around on the ground, screaming under the wand of the younger man.

Harry went cold. “Impedimenta! Stupefy! Expelliarmus!” the third spell caught the younger Death Eater, his wand flying away. Ginny lay still on the floor, breathing hard.

The second Death Eater didn’t wait. “Avada Kedavra!” green light shot toward Harry, and as Ginny screamed...

“Gladii!” he brought the sword up, automatically treating this as another surprise test. The Death Eater blinked in surprise, but followed up immediately with a “Stupefy!” Harry ran toward him, the red beam of light impacting harmlessly on his shield cloak, surprising the man. Then Harry swung the sword around, hitting the man in the head with the flat of it.

“Stupefy!” and the surprised man fell over, stunned. Harry conjured ropes to tie them up with. Ginny was shaking as Harry bent down beside her.

“You all right, Gin?”

She sat up. "I thought you were going to die," she said flatly. "And after the pain..." she glared at the younger death eater.

"Avis," Harry provided for her. A group of small black birds appeared, twittering.

"Thanks, Harry. Oppugno!" the birds began flying around the younger Death Eater, pecking viciously at his face. After a few minutes, Harry vanished the birds.

"Should we go back down?" he said gently. "We can bring these two." Levicorpus, he thought automatically in his head, jerking his wand. It was the only non-verbal spell he could perform successfully every time.

As they walked slowly out of the house, still wearing the shield cloaks, Ginny said softly, "I'm sorry, Harry."

"What? What for?"

"I shouldn't have attacked them. It was stupid. But I didn't want them to destroy your things...these robes, your invisibility cloak, your photo album..."

"Gin, it's all right. I was just seconds away from doing exactly what you did."

She only looked a little bit comforted by this. "Harry, why did they want to destroy your things? Besides to annoy you, of course."

Harry thought about it for a moment. "Priori Incantatem," he said thoughtfully.

"What?"

He gave her a brief description of what had happened in the graveyard in fourth year. "Maybe this was just on the off chance that my wand was in my trunk." His knees suddenly buckled. "Gin, he shot the killing curse at me...and I just stood there, and assumed that the sword would take it. What if it hadn't?" the adrenaline was



disappearing. How could he have done such a foolhardy, stupid thing?

Ginny grabbed his hand. "But it did. That's what you're training for, Harry. It's the only way to block the killing curse. You couldn't have gotten out of the way in time."

Harry shivered. It was true. If he hadn't had the slim, one inch across sword, he would be dead now. It was a terrifying thought.

As they made their way down the last hill toward the wedding site, Harry could see that Bill had somehow gotten drenched, and was looking around, presumably, for Fred and George. The humor seemed to have gone out of the situation, though.

“Harry, what the—: Ron shouted. Several heads turned their way, then more when they saw the two bound men floating in front of Harry.

Tonks and Kingsley immediately ran forward, taking the prisoners. Tonks’ eyebrows rose very high when she saw their faces.

“Auror Johnston? What the...” she looked at Harry. “Where were they?”

Harry briefly told the story, excluding the part where he had blocked the killing curse. It was still mildly disturbing him.

“Destroying your stuff...good thing you got there in time,” said Kingsley, studying them. “What were you two doing there, anyway?”

Harry glanced at Ginny. “Er...” he wasn’t sure whether or not Kingsley knew about his invisibility cloak, and he didn’t want to tell if the man didn’t already know.

“It’s all right, you don’t have to tell,” said the big auror, winking. “We’ll take care of these two, Harry. Don’t worry about it.” He cast his own levitation spell and moved the two prisoners away, talking quietly with Tonks.

Harry took a seat beside Ginny at one of the tables, and was immediately surrounded by people asking excitedly what had happened.

“Clear off, people,” came the distinctive voice of Ron, who was pushing people aside in an effort to get to Harry. Amid mutters, the crowd dissipated, and they found themselves alone with Ron and Hermione, although not safe from the curious glances and mutterings.

“So tell us. What happened?” asked Ron, sitting down. He had somehow acquired two more slices of wedding cake.

Ginny told the story this time, giving Harry time to wet his throat. Ron's mouth was open by the end, and Hermione looked horrified. Ginny hadn't left anything out.

"You blocked a killing curse with the sword?" said Hermione, looking like he had actually died.

"It worked," said Ginny. "And then he beat the death eater over the head with the sword. Harry, the way you were running at him, I thought you were going to run him through with that thing."

Harry stared at the sword, seeing the killing curse hitting it. It was terrifying that he had, seemingly without thinking, relied on the sword to block the curse. What if it hadn't? That thought was too terrible to entertain. At least now he knew for sure that he could block an unforgivable; none of the group had been willing to attempt an unforgivable to test this ability.

He sighed and dropped out of the conversation as Ron, Hermione and Ginny continued to discuss what the Death Eaters had been doing.

The trio, or now the quartet including Ginny, spent the next few weeks keeping to themselves. After seeing what the sword could do firsthand, Harry worked at his training with renewed vigor, and improved as much as to be able to consistently block three curses sent his way at once. The rest of the Weasley household quickly got into the game, and Harry had to be constantly wary anywhere he went, even in the loo. Ron had burst in through the door once, sending a petrificus curse at Harry and catching him unawares. The consequences had not been good, to say the least, and had culminated in Ron laughing too hard to reverse the spell for five minutes.

As a consequence, Fred and George were now hard at work creating combat gloves for Harry to wear, that could not only keep a grip on the sword and his wand without slipping out when his palms got sweaty, but could also block minor curses sent at him, to as great an extent as the shield cloaks. With them, should Ron happen to burst

into the loo again as he went, Harry would be able to reach behind him and catch the spell instead of relying on the sword.

Since aurors were frequently around the burrow, on constant watch after the break-in on the wedding, Harry got a lot of actual magical training as well. Hermione consulted Bill about many of her made-up spells, and Harry walked past Hermione's room one day to hear them having a vigorous argument about the *deleo* spell. Apparently, according to Bill, it was only one syllable off the spell for getting rid of the *priori incantato* spell, and needed a specific wand movement. Hermione was arguing against it, as she had tried the spell frequently and hadn't needed the wand movement.

Kingsley came by for about an hour every day and began teaching Harry and Ron a discipline of muggle martial arts. Hermione scorned this, but Harry and Ron were enthusiastic about it after seeing Kingsley effortlessly beat both the twins at the same time in a non-magical duel—until they found out just how much physical training it required. Kingsley set the two of them a rigorous daily routine, which Harry and Ron pushed themselves through every morning. Kingsley warned them that he wouldn't be around forever to teach them, and they would have to be able to exercise without him pushing them.

Harry moved onto the final step of the animagus transformation along with Hermione, while Ron was well into the second step and Ginny just moving into it. Harry was now waking from his meditation attempting to flex his fingers and walking on all four legs. Hermione had to cast *Colloportus* on the door while they practiced, lest Mrs. Weasley come in and find out what they were doing, or should Harry get it into his mind to gallop out the door on all fours. Harry's birthday finally came around. He was woken up in the morning by Ron shaking him.

"What? Whassamatter?" he muttered, falling out of bed with a thump.

"Kingsley says that since it's your birthday, you don't need to do morning exercises," said Ron. "But for your present, he and Moody cast this charm on the lake. It's really warm. We're going swimming!"

Harry grinned and dressed, going downstairs to find Hermione, Ginny, Fred and George already waiting. "Happy Birthday," they chorused as he walked down the stairs. He grinned, seeing that his favorite breakfast, scrambled eggs, toast and kippers, had been prepared for him.

"I don't have swimming trunks," said Harry apologetically.

"We got you some," said Hermione. "Let's go. We're wasting time. The charm was really hard. I watched them cast it. It's only going to last for three more hours." Without further ado, she led the way out the door.

They actually had gotten him swimming trunks, in dark blue. He was last into the lake, wading in hesitantly; although the water was delightfully warm, like a bath, he had never officially learned how to swim.

"Harry, come on!" called Ginny. Fred and George swam over and pulled him in. "Water quidditch!" Hermione was rolling her eyes.

They improvised an odd sort of quidditch, with no bludgers, and a snitch that only stayed about a foot above the water: Fred, George and Ginny against Harry, Ron and Hermione. Harry's team lost spectacularly, mainly due to, though no one would admit it, Hermione's abysmal ability at the game. The pond was shallow enough that Harry could always touch the bottom with his feet safely, making for a very enjoyable morning.

When they tired of the quidditch game, Ron and Ginny began to teach Harry basic swimming strokes. He mastered the front and back crawls before calling it a day as the water began to get colder.

They changed back and got to the Burrow to find the entire Order waiting in the kitchen, along with various friends from school, including most of the DA. A massive pile of presents sat beside a birthday cake that rivaled Bill and Fleur's wedding cake.

Most of the crowd surged forward to greet them, thrusting a drink and snacks into Harry's hands and leading him to a chair in front of the

presents to a rousing chorus of “Happy Birthday”. He didn’t quite know what to say; he had never really had a real birthday before. He was a touch overwhelmed by all the people coming to him and wishing him well; some he barely even knew.

Ginny sat beside him and passed him a present. “This one’s from all of us,” she whispered. Harry tore the wrapping paper off the bulky object.

“Wow...Ginny...”

“And Ron and Hermione,” she prompted.

“And Ron and Hermione,” he repeated obediently. “This is amazing.”

It was a belt, dragonhide by the look of it. Attached was a long object that was unmistakable a sheath for Gryffindor’s sword. Harry quickly pulled the sword out and slid it into the sheath. It fit perfectly.

“When did you do this?” he said, staring at Ron, Hermione and Ginny in awe.

“We took it while you were asleep,” said Ron nonchalantly. “Brought it to that weird store in Kn—er, Diagon Alley. The one that sold spare eyeballs. They made it.”

He lowered his voice on the last part as Harry buckled the belt around his waist. It fit perfectly. He knocked on it, disillusioning it easily.

Neville cleared his throat loudly. “That kind of makes my present seem a little pathetic,” he said, offering forward a bag, which turned out to be ultra-strong dungbombs. Harry grinned and thanked Neville, assuring him that his gift was most certainly not inadequate.

This started a flood of presents coming to Harry, overwhelming him. He had never received more than five or six gifts at a time before now. Everything from new robes to sweets were given to him. Ginny, to his surprise, gave him a ring with a tiny, animated dragon slithering around on it, matching the sheath. He stared at her in slight amazement, and she shrugged and said, a bit self-consciously, that

she hadn't really contributed to the sheath, so she had gotten him the matching ring. Harry slid it onto his middle finger immediately, where it adjusted to fit him perfectly.

His final gift came from Kingsley, Tonks and Remus, and was a book of martial arts techniques, with miniature figures of the three friends, who would demonstrate the things in the book. Kingsley informed him that he had to go on some sort of duty for the ministry next week and would not be able to continue lessons, but the book would work just fine.

He was forced to cut the birthday cake (double chocolate) and take the first, large, slice. He then mingled with the crowd, talking to those he hadn't seen for a month.

Most of the DA members there were returning to Hogwarts, though a few of the hufflepuffs weren't. Susan Bones told him stonily that she was practicing dueling every day, having come of age in May, and was ready to go hunting Death Eaters. Harry recalled that Amelia Bones had been killed, apparently sparking the need for revenge in Susan.

Harry offered around his various sweets to everyone, which were received with great enthusiasm by Ron in particular. As the guests drifted out, he thought with contentment that it had been the best birthday he had ever had. Although apparently it wasn't over yet.

As they wandered up to Harry's room and settled down to talk, Harry grabbed the encyclopedia and slid into his regular meditation. He could do it almost effortlessly now.

He was much larger, with a shaggy mane growing over his neck. He padded softly through the forest, aware of everything around him. He was the lion. The forest was deceptively silent...he kept walking, stopping when he scented what he was looking for, the ripe smell of zebra...he crouched and sprung...

"Argh!"

The world was smaller. Ron, Hermione and Ginny were smaller. He fell forward onto four legs and swished his tail...tail?

“What—” he began, but it came out as a hoarse growl. Ginny’s blurred face looked terrified; he could smell meat, he pounced...

“Harry! What the hell are you doing?” Ron scrambled to get out of the way as Harry shook his mane out. Hermione was frantically paging through the book.

“Concentrate, Harry! You look like a lion, but you aren’t one! We are not your prey! Come on, Harry...”

He was Harry Potter. He had green eyes, unruly black hair, a lightning-bolt scar...because of Voldemort...he wanted to rip Voldemort apart...

“Harry! Concentrate on your own physical appearance! Some sort of memory from when you were human! You should be good at it, it’s just like making a patronus. Come on, Harry...”

A memory...he thought about Ginny’s smile as they handed him the sheath...she had looked so happy...he was shrinking...

“That was scary, mate.” Ron was saying, patting him on the back.

“What...what did I do?”

“You pounced on me!” cried Ron. Hermione made a coughing sound, sounding suspiciously like a laugh.

“It wasn’t funny!” cried Ron, turning to look at her.

“It kind of was,” said Ginny, muffling her laughter. “You should have seen his face, Harry...” she suddenly jumped forward and hugged him. “You did it! You did the animagus transformation!” Hermione only looked slightly jealous as she came forward to congratulate Harry as well.



“What did I look like?” said Harry eagerly. He knew animagi had distinguishing marks.

“Uh...you looked a bit yellow for a lion,” said Ron, frowning. “I mean, I’ve never seen one, but you looked...”

“Gold,” Ginny finished. “I mean, your body was mostly orange, but it was like your mane was golden...”

“And you had a gold lightning bolt on your forehead,” added Hermione.

“What? I didn’t notice that,” said Ron, frowning.

“You have to look closely to see it,” said Hermione. “That’s good, because we don’t want you to be too distinguishable...this is illegal, after all.”

“If it’s this easy to become an animagus, why don’t more people do it?” said Harry, frowning. “I mean, if I managed it after just a month and a half...”

“I bet there are a lot of illegal ones out there,” said Ron, grinning. “People who don’t want to go through the stupid ministry filing process.”

He concentrated on the lion again. It came easier this time, and he was bigger, on four legs, and looking right into the surprised eyes of Ron.

“Whoa! Harry, stop it, that’s kind of freaky...” Harry changed back, grinning ear-to-ear.

“You try it, Hermione. Go ahead.”

Hermione went into her meditative state, but came out two hours later without turning into a cat. She came out looking extremely disappointed. The three of them attempted to cheer her up by telling her she would get it the next day, but she continued to be depressed

until Harry turned into a lion again and licked her face until she finally laughed.

They were packed and on edge for the next week; after all, the portal was supposed to open in August. No news came, however, and they continued to train, using all the help they could get. Fred, George and Hermione could be constantly found with their heads together over the Latin dictionary; now that Bill and Fleur had left on their honeymoon, Fred and George had taken up Bill's mantle and, according to Hermione, were actually very good at creating spells.

The spells sent at Harry for him to block with the sword gradually moved out of the range of more harmless spells, to the point where Fred sent a powerful bludgeoning spell at his back, which he blocked just in time. He had practically felt the spell whizzing toward his back; Fred had been astounded, as the curse had been non-verbal.

Mad-Eye Moody came by after hearing about the attempts on Harry's things, and taught the trio various security spells for their trunks. Harry's was now waterproof, fireproof, and bit anyone besides Harry, Ron or Hermione who tried to open it.

Finally at breakfast on the twelfth of August, the fireplace erupted in green flames and McGonagall stepped through. She greeted Molly, then looked at Harry pointedly, jerking her head at the next room. Harry followed her into the empty room, where she said quietly, "Are you sure you want to do this, Potter?"

Harry nodded mutely. She sighed and said, "The portal will be open for two more hours. Bring your things, but pack light; things like food won't be necessary, and if you choose to bring potions flasks, they may shatter. Keep that in mind."

"We won't be bringing potions," said Harry immediately. "What about gold? We picked up quite a lot last week, just in case..."

"Good foresight, Potter. Money will be fine, I am sure. Be at Hogwarts as soon as you can." With a curt nod, she turned and strode back into the fireplace.

Harry went back into the kitchen, where Ron was explaining patiently to Molly that they would be leaving now. Ginny had disappeared somewhere. Harry made his way up to the room and levitated the three trunks down. Despite McGonagall's warning to pack light, he had packed everything he owned, from his robes to his broomstick.

They got to Hogwarts in just under ten minutes. The Forbidden Forest was eerily silent; it was as if everything that lived there had disappeared. Hagrid met them at the edge, looking rather excited.

"Never got a chance ter see th' portal open," he said happily as they followed him into the forest. "I mean, I saw it open, never got ter see someone go through it..." he stopped and turned to them. "You three be careful, right? I mean, I know yer goin' to come righ' back, and I guess it's good that your leavin' for a while...Scrimgeour's been around here asking for you a coupla times...ruddy jerk. Brought Umbridge with him."

"What happened?" said Harry, frowning, as they resumed their walk.

"Scrimgeour came. Not much better than Fudge, that one," growled Hagrid. "Wanted to know if th' school was stayin' open, or if he could send refugees here or summat..."

"This is a school, not a refugee camp," said Hermione, frowning. "Besides, where would refugees come from? There haven't been any big attacks. It isn't as if anyone has been thrown out of their houses."

"Yet," muttered Harry darkly.

"Right, Harry," continued Hagrid. They were walking through the forest in a direction Harry had never been before, the opposite direction from the acromantulas. "Scrimgeour figures he can send families here when the big attacks start...like he's doing much ter stop 'em."

The walk continued in silence for a while. Then Hagrid said, "He wanted ter take ye into Ministry custody, Harry. For withholdin' critical information, or summat like that. About," Hagrid choked slightly, "Dumbledore."

“Right,” said Harry, slightly confused.

“Ministry custody? Like a criminal?” said Hermione disbelievingly.

“Why aren’t they concentrating on finding Snape?” said Harry angrily.

“We know he’s innocent, now,” said Hermione carefully. “Dumbledore himself—”

“But the ministry don’t know themselves,” said Harry. “He’s the one who killed Dumbledore. They should be searching for him.”

“This is th’ place, Harry,” said Hagrid. Harry glanced up. They were at the edge of a fairly plain-looking clearing. The only thing that looked slightly out of the ordinary was the shape; the clearing appeared to be shaped as a perfect eight-pointed star. Other than that, it could have been any other clearing, but for the trees on the outside, which were more densely packed, baking the clearing shape more obvious.

“This is it? Doesn’t look like much,” said Ron, looking unimpressed.

“It’s an octogam,” whispered Hermione. “The most powerfully magical shape. Do we just walk into the center?”

“Tha’s what McGonagall said,” said Hagrid, clapping them in a hug. “I’ll miss you, Harry. Did ye get my cakes for yer birthday?” Harry nodded and politely thanked Hagrid. He had discreetly gotten rid of the rock cakes the day after his birthday, although Ron had been in favor of using them as five-pound weights in their exercise routine.

They dragged their trunks to the center of the clearing, and Harry could somehow tell that something was different from the rest of the forest. Hagrid waved from the side, then turned away as the wind picked up.

“What’s going on?” called Ron. “Hermione, I know you read up on this...” Harry noted that they were sitting together on Ron’s trunk.

“This is normal!” Hermione shouted back, the wind blowing her words back at her. “In a moment there should be lightning...”

Harry glanced around frantically. Despite Hermione’s assurances that this was normal, he was beginning to get unnerved.

A golden sphere appeared in the middle of the clearing, roughly the size of a quaffle. Harry and Ron had been instructed in this bit by Hermione; they both reached forward and touched their hands to the globe, taking care to keep some bodypart touching their trunks as well. Harry began counting silently down from ten. When he hit three, he realized that there was a fourth trunk in the clearing; the invisibility cloak slid off most of Ginny’s body and her brown eyes met Harry’s startled green ones, then everything went white.

Harry opened his eyes slowly, feeling like someone was stomping on his head. They were still in the clearing, but the sky was darker, and it was raining.

He sat up slowly, feeling the comforting bulk of his trunk against his back. The others were strewn about the clearing, Ron far behind him, Hermione in one of the outer points to his left, and Ginny...

Ginny?

He jumped up, hearing Ron groan but giving it no thought. "Ginny! What the..." she opened her eyes, looking at him blearily.

"Hey, Harry."

"What are you doing here? You were supposed to stay home!" he yelled. "You said you wouldn't be coming on this trip! It's too dangerous!"

She glared at him. "Harry Potter, we are not going out anymore, and even then you could not order me around. Neither can Ron. I wouldn't be going back to school this year anyways. Mum wouldn't let me. Do you think I could survive for months without any news from the three of you? I can help you, Harry. I'm as good as Ron at dueling, and look." She dove at him, changing smoothly in midair into a tiger, bowling him over. She got up and immediately changed back. "I finished the animagus transformation before Hermione. And you can't get back until the month is up. So you're stuck with me."

Ron stood up hesitantly, and suddenly appeared to notice the presence of his sister. There followed a long string of language that impressed Harry and would have gotten a long rant from Molly Weasley.

Hermione woke as well, and looked shocked to see Ginny there. Ginny ran through the same explanation she had with Harry, although she substituted the fact that she was merely a good dueler for being as good as Ron. Hermione looked disappointed with the animagus

transformation, and Harry could tell that she was annoyed that she hadn't accomplished it yet herself.

"Look, Ginny, you were good in the DA," said Harry, still not over his anger. "But don't you understand that Death Eaters won't be taken down by the Bat Bogey hex?"

"This is the real world, Ginny!" shouted Ron. "This is going to be such a mess! Why did you have to follow us?"

"You're going to be happy about it later," said Ginny, glaring at Ron. "When I save your ass from some Death Eater. The more people you have in your group, the better."

"You took my invisibility cloak!" said Harry, not quite believing it. "How did you get into my trunk?"

"You leave it open while you shower so you can get your clothes out fast," said Ginny, shrugging. "Look, stop arguing. You're stuck with me. Deal with it."

"We are, Harry," said Hermione, sighing. "We can't go back for a full month."

"Fine," said Harry, glaring. "When a month passes, you're back, Ginny. All right?"

"Fair enough," said Ginny, meeting his glare for glare. "I'll change your mind by then. You'll see. A lot can happen in a month."

It began to rain harder, and Harry shivered. "Let's get somewhere. To the castle?"

"No," Hermione shook her head. "They have a Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny there. We need to get somewhere like the Three Broomsticks, so we can disguise ourselves. I have a book on it—"

"Like everything else," muttered Harry.

“–Changing our hair color should be fine for now,” said Hermione, waving her wand. Harry, Ron and Ginny were suddenly all brunettes and Hermione was a blond. “Let’s just get a room for the night.”

They shrank their trunks and carried them along the path through the forest, silently. Harry cast a warming charm on each person, to looks of gratitude. By the time they reached the edge of the forest, the sky was dark.

“What time is it, anyway?” asked Ron. Harry hushed him, pointing at Hagrid’s cabin, where a light was on. They walked past it silently, and down to Hogsmeade. By the time they walked into the Three Broomsticks, the four were all drenched and shivering despite the warming charm.

Madam Rosmerta fussed over them despite the fact that she didn’t know who they were. In their everyday robes, with the sword disillusioned, they didn’t look particularly menacing, Harry had to admit. He introduced himself as John, unable to think of any other, more creative, name at the moment. When called to introduce himself, Ron looked panicked for a moment, and then called himself Arthur. Hermione rolled her eyes at this and introduced herself as Jane, which Harry knew was her middle name. Ginny called herself Eva, for no apparent reason.

Harry paid them for one night and a meal sent up to their room. The room was very nice, but it only had two beds. After changing out of his sopping robes, Harry conjured a creaking contraption that looked like it was about to fall over. Hermione vanished it without asking and conjured a much steadier pair of camp beds. Harry mock-glared at her. She responded by smiling sweetly and saying, “Stupefy!” Harry brought the sword up casually in front of himself, blocking the spell.

The meal arrived, and Hermione set about researching spells to change appearance. Harry was unsurprised to see what appeared to be a small library in her trunk. It was just like Hermione to bring every book she owned.



He was just finishing his roast beef when Ginny nudged him and jerked her head at Ron, who was gazing at Hermione happily.

“I think Eva and I might go down to the bar,” Harry said. Hermione nodded impatiently and Ron appeared to not hear them at all. Harry grinned at Ginny as they left the room.

“He’s pretty obvious, isn’t he,” said Ginny, smiling, as they took a seat at a table near the window. “She looks nice with blond hair, and he’s actually noticing for once.”

Harry shrugged noncommittally. “Yeah,” he said, feeling out of his depth.

“Oh, come on,” said Ginny, laughing. “Don’t tell me you don’t notice how he looks at her.”

“Yeah, he does like her,” Harry agreed tentatively.

“Oh, come on, Harry—” Ginny stopped, and her eyes widened. Harry turned around and couldn’t stop his jaw from dropping as Neville Longbottom walked into the bar, followed by none other than Ron Weasley.

“What are they doing here?” Harry hissed at Ginny. “It must be summer here, too! The portal only moved us through universes, not time, too!”

“Hermione said the transfer takes a week to get us from one world to another,” Ginny whispered back. “There’s only a week left until term starts here. They might just be staying in Hogsmeade or at Hogwarts until term starts.”

Harry sighed and nodded, staring at Neville. So he was the Boy-Who-Lived here? He didn’t look to have gone through what Harry had, although seeing the lightning-bolt scar on Neville’s forehead was a shock. The boy looked, for the most part, like the Neville from home, but for a slight air of confidence, almost arrogance, that surrounded him, and the other Neville could never have managed.

And as for Ron...this Ron was for the most part the same, but for the fact that he seemed even taller, and more muscular. The two of them ordered drinks from the bar and eyed the other customers.

“Should we get out of here?” Harry muttered to Ginny. “Your hair is different, but Ron should still know his own sister...”

Ginny frowned and unexpectedly leaned forward, kissing him on the cheek. Harry stared at her in shock. “What—”

“Neville just winked at me,” she whispered. “I thought if we acted like a couple, he wouldn’t come over here. I’m not ready for this, Harry. Let’s go back to the room.” Harry stood up, tossing a Galleon on the table for the drinks, and at Ginny’s bidding, slung an arm around her shoulder as they left the room. Harry could feel Neville’s eyes on them as they walked away.

When they got to the room, Harry opened the door as loudly as he could. When they peered in, they found Ron and Hermione sitting on opposite sides of the bed, both extremely red-faced. Harry exchanged glances with Ginny as they walked in, then had to look away to keep from laughing.

“We saw you down in the bar, Ron,” said Ginny conversationally. Ron turned to stare at her.

“What?”

“You and Neville,” said Harry. “The other versions.”

“What were they like? Did they notice you?” said Hermione, sounding concerned.

Harry described what had happened downstairs. When he had finished, Hermione showed them several spells they could do to change their appearance.

“We could go with a simple glamour, but that wouldn’t last long enough. You would have to keep recasting it,” she said, sounding like Professor McGonagall. “If you use multiple spells, not only will each last longer, but they won’t all come off with one finite incantatem.” She showed the three of them the spells she had found. By the end, Harry had different colored eyes, hair and skin. Ginny had been transformed into someone very reminiscent of Lavendar Brown. They had based Ron’s appearance on Remus, and Hermione looked like a cross between her old self and Luna.

“All right, so the first place we need to search is Hogwarts. The head office,” said Hermione. “And the restricted section of the library. Dumbledore owned the book at some point, but I’m not sure if he still has it in this timeline. All we know is that it still exists.”

“How are we going to get into the head’s office?” said Ron, snorting. “Whether it’s Dumbledore or McGonagall, they don’t just let strangers into their office.”

“We’re going to have to get into the school somehow,” said Harry pensively. “Someone might have to go disguised as a student.”

Hermione frowned. “It’s none of us or all of us, Harry. We can’t just take up residence near the school while only one of us goes there or something.” She sighed. “Look, we can figure something out tomorrow. Right now I need a shower and I’m tired.”

Harry woke up when a beam of bright sunlight fell across his face. He squinted at Ginny, who had opened a window on his face.

“Ow. Close that,” he said, turning over.

“No. This is important, Harry,” she said. “We found a way to get into the school. Well, Hermione and I did.”

“What?” said Harry, sitting up and shoving his glasses onto his face. “How?”

“You’re going to like this, Harry,” she said, tossing the Daily Prophet onto his lap. He blearily picked it up. “When did you find this?”

“Hermione and I thought we could leave you two to sleep in. We just went down into the bar to get breakfast and we found it!” she beamed at him.

“What? Gringotts Opens New Branch?” said Harry, reading the headline.

“No. The side column.”

Harry scanned it. Oh, no...

“McGonagall Still Searching for Defense Teacher,” said Ginny, as though he hadn’t read it yet. “You could—”

“Teach defense to myself?” said Harry incredulously. “And you, Hermione, Ron, Neville—”

“Under a different name, obviously,” said Ginny enthusiastically. “We would help you. We could say we were from Africa, or Australia, or America or something and just got here, looking for jobs. Then you could handle the older grades, Hermione can teach the younger ones, we’ll pretend to be recently married couples, and obviously we’ll have to get into the head office sometimes. As teachers, we would even have access to the restricted section!”

Only one part of this registered to Harry. “Married couples?”

“I brought you two breakfast,” came the voice of Hermione. “If Ron ever wakes.”

“Married couples?”

“It’s the perfect cover, Harry,” said Hermione reasonably. “How else would we get four of us in there?”

“They’ll realize that we’re only seventeen. Ginny’s only sixteen,” Harry protested. “They’ll ask where we’re from and why we’re here.”

“No they won’t. McGonagall is pretty much desperate. She’ll take anyone for this job. We’ll lie about our ages,” said Hermione. “You look older with that hair anyway. So does Ginny.”

“Wait, I’ll be pretending to be married to Ginny?” said Harry suspiciously.

“Obviously,” said Hermione. “Don’t pretend you don’t want to.”

“Well...” there were no barriers, were there? He and Ginny could be together in this reality. Voldemort didn’t know who they were. They wouldn’t be targets.

It was difficult to fully comprehend the freedom they had here. They could do anything. Ginny and Hermione appeared to be merely waiting for him to realize this.

“Yeah. Let’s do it,” he said happily. He could think of the risks later. “Ginny, do you want to be my girlfriend? Just until we go back to the real world.” Hermione drifted away somewhere.

Ginny bit her lip, and sudden nervousness overcame Harry. “I mean, if you want...”

She sighed. “Well, the thing is, Harry, Neville last night...well, I think there’s something going on with us now.” She looked at his expression, and then laughed. “Of course I will, you prat. I know it’s just until we go back, but I’d love to be your girlfriend.” And without further ado, she leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth.

He was surprised at first, but then leaned into her. Leaving the room, Hermione smiled softly.

“All right. So how do I look?” asked Harry, wiping his sweaty palms on his blue robes.

“Exactly the same as you’ve looked for the past two hours,” said Ginny, rolling her eyes. “Don’t worry about it. Of course we’ll be hired. McGonagall would hire anyone at this point, bar Voldemort himself.”

Harry laughed, and saw an owl flying toward them. “There it is!”

They were sitting outside the Three Broomsticks. The rain from the day before had quickly cleared up, and the sky was now clear blue. They had sent a rented post owl off several hours ago to Headmistress McGonagall stating that they were interested in the Defense job and were prepared for an interview any time in the next week. Ron had been filled in and was enthusiastic about the idea, stating that he couldn’t wait to start making his own money and stop mooching off Harry all the time. They had all laughed hesitantly at this.

Harry quickly unrolled the parchment while Ginny paid the post owl. He scanned it quickly. “She wants to see us today. In... an hour, if we can make it.” He took a deep breath. “Where are Ron and Hermione?”

“Doing something in their room,” Ginny said casually. “Something we might not want to interrupt for maybe another half hour?” they laughed together, and Harry marvelled at the fact that no one would be targeting them for being together.

“So, do you think we should start planning lessons, or just wing this?” he said. “I mean, obviously the Defense curse is still here in this reality. The kids have probably had just as bad teaching as us. I wonder if someone created any kind of DA here?”

Ginny shrugged. “We’re only taking fifth year and up. Hermione figures she and Ron can take first to fourth years. So you could probably structure it just like the DA. It all depends on how good these people are at Defense. And if there was no DA, they probably aren’t much good at it.”

Harry sighed. “What if they’re better than me?”

Ginny startled him by laughing loudly. "Better than you? Harry, when you were in fourth year no one at Hogwarts was better than you at Defense. Now that you're in seventh, no one will even come close to you."

"But there's another Harry here. What if he's better?"

"I doubt it," said Ginny, snorting. "He never had to go through the triwizard tournament, did he? You got too much training out of that. And the DA, and training this summer. No one will be better than you."

"Unless Neville..."

"Harry, we had a look at current events here," said Ginny, her tone turning serious. "Neville...Neville had no living relatives left after the killing curse rebounded on Voldemort. Dumbledore kept him here at Hogwarts, and I have to say..." she sighed. "He doesn't make as good a boy-who-lived as you. Voldemort came back when you were eleven, and I was ten. He captured Neville right out of Hogwarts for the resurrection."

Harry frowned. "If Neville was kept at Hogwarts, wouldn't Dumbledore have trained him at least a little?"

"That's another thing," said Ginny. "Dumbledore was murdered around...your fourth year, my third? I'm not saying that's a reason for Neville not to be trained; for all I know, he might be. But he definitely doesn't have Gryffindor's sword, and probably didn't have all the hands-on stuff you had to handle either. The Sorcerer's Stone, the Chamber of Secrets, the Tournament, Sirius, the Department of Mysteries...for most of his life he was either hidden at Hogwarts or running from Voldemort."

It made a sort of gruesome sense, after a fashion. If Voldemort had already been resurrected, he wouldn't have needed to go after the stone. Malfoy wouldn't have bothered with the Chamber of Secrets; Voldemort would have taken his Horcrux back. Sirius wouldn't have

been framed; there wouldn't have been that elaborate scheme to get Harry to the graveyard...

"But there was still a triwizard tournament, wasn't there?" said Harry, thinking hard.

"There might have been," Ginny shrugged. "We couldn't exactly get all the facts. But everyone here seems edgy. Harry, there are a lot of people and families we knew back home that have been killed here, with Voldemort back for three years longer. At least, that's what Hermione says, and she was up early this morning doing research."

"We need more facts. We need to know more of the history of this school, and getting the teaching job should probably help with that."

"Wait, what about the Defense curse?" said Harry, the thought suddenly hitting him.

"What? You don't believe that old myth, do you?" said Ginny, laughing lightly.

"It actually exists," said Harry seriously. "Tom Riddle cast it. Dumbledore showed me in his pensieve..." he explained what he had seen last year to Ginny, who looked grave.

"I doubt we'll be staying all year," she said at last. "Probably not longer than a few months. We'll worry about it when it comes. But in the meantime," she smiled, "We should get Ron and Hermione out of that room."

They set off for the room, walking at a sedate pace. When they got to their door, Harry knocked several times, loudly, before entering. Ron and Hermione both looked dishevelled, and Hermione was practically sitting on Ron's lap as they both supposedly stared at the encyclopaedia.

"That's upside down," commented Ginny. "Are you two picking up some habits from Luna?"



“We’re due up at the castle in half an hour,” added Harry. “We should start walking now, hm?”

“Or we could apparate to the edge of the anti-apparation ward,” said Ron. “It would be easier.”

“Let’s walk,” said Ginny, rolling her eyes. “You two didn’t do your exercises this morning anyway. No getting out of exercise now for you, Ron.” Ron rolled his eyes good-naturedly, but changed into some good robes when prompted to begin the walk down. Hermione tied her hair back in a tight bun reminiscent of Professor McGonagall, provoking several jokes about what McGonagall would say at seeing her long-lost daughter.

They made it to the castle with a mere ten minutes to spare and were, surprisingly, met at the door by Filch, who said sycophantically, “The headmistress is waiting in her office. If you would follow?”

Harry gulped and led the way after the caretaker, into the halls of a Hogwarts that was not theirs.

Harry was struck by how similar the school was to the one at home. He could almost forget just how far away from what was really home they were.

Filch led them through the familiar route to the Head Office. Ron dropped back with Harry and muttered quietly, "No wonder no one takes this job if she lets Filch bring the applicants in." the two snickered for a moment before a glare from Hermione silenced them.

Filch ushered them up the winding staircase and into the Head Office, where Professor McGonagall waited forbiddingly behind the desk. Harry tied not to look at Dumbledore's portrait, as he had a feeling that whichever reality the old man was from, he knew exactly who they were.

McGonagall stood up with a smile on her face as they entered. "Good afternoon. I'm Minerva McGonagall." She held out a hand for Harry to shake. Harry took it, trying not to sweat.

"Harold Evans," he said, smiling. He had insisted on keeping his first name, although Hermione had told him it was foolishly risky. They had agreed by extending it to the full version, which Harry didn't particularly like, but was at least his name. He didn't think that anyone would pick up his mother's last name, as everyone remembered her as Lily Potter, not Evans. "And my wife, Jennifer." Ginny had said that Jenny would be a good nickname for her to use, as if anyone slipped up, the sound wasn't that different.

"And Henry Anderson," said Ron, moving up to shake McGonagall's hand as well. His other hand was shaking, Harry noticed.

"Jane Anderson," added Hermione, who had elected to continue to use her middle name. "From America."

"Ah. Whereabouts?" said McGonagall, waving them to the four seats set up for them. Harry couldn't think of anything—his knowledge of continents other than Europe was limited—but

Hermione said smoothly, "California. Although we have all spent time in England."

"Ah. And how old are you?"

"Twenty-one," said Harry carefully, trying to act naturally. "Although Jennifer is twenty."

"I see," said Professor McGonagall, making a note. "I will be blunt with you, Mr. Evans. Whatever your qualifications are, I need a teacher for this job. We have had a most unfortunate run of teachers leaving or having unfortunate things happening to them. If you were only seventeen and just out of school, I would give you this job." Harry's face reddened and he wondered if she actually would. "Where did you go to school?"

"Salem," said Harry. "Henry and I went to the Wizard's institute, Jenny and Jane to the Witches."

"And what would be your plans for lessons and teaching here?"

"To be honest, Headmistress—"

"Feel free to call me Minerva, of course," McGonagall interrupted.

"—thank you, Minerva," said Harry, wondering if he would be able to get used to that, "We saw your advertisement in the Prophet just this morning. None of us are sure that we are particularly good at teaching yet; all we are sure about is our skill in defense. Myself and Jennifer will be teaching the fifth, sixth and seventh years, while Jane and Henry will be teaching all the younger students. Past that, we don't know the children's capabilities, and we will need to know that before we begin to teach." Harry realized that he was easing into his role, and was not nearly as nervous anymore.

"I see," said McGonagall, and she actually looked impressed. "I am sure you will be very capable. You are right; the teaching in this subject has been...fragmented." Harry risked a glance at

Dumbledore's portrait. The old wizard was sleeping. Harry wondered if he had told McGonagall about the defense curse.

"We intend to remedy this," said Hermione carefully.

"That would be wonderful, Jane." McGonagall sighed. "You may, of course, have the job. The pay is not particularly high; approximately fifty Galleons a month each—" Ron made a small noise in his throat, and Harry didn't dare to look at him. "You have, of course, residence in the school if you wish, although I'm afraid we only have two Defense offices, and one has not been used for nearly a decade. I'll have someone clean it out. The two offices join with each other. Do you mind?"

"Sounds perfect," said Harry, shrugging.

"Wonderful. I'll have someone take you on a tour of a school, hopefully a teacher and not Mr. Filch. I would be delighted to help with your lesson plan if you require it."

"Thank you, Minerva," said Harry, relieved. Professor McGonagall stood up and led the way out of the office, leaning heavily on a cane which she hadn't needed back home.

They took a quick tour of the school with Professor Flitwick leading them around, introducing them to many things that Harry hadn't been aware of before, such as staff bathrooms and quarters. He ended by showing them to their offices, which adjoined together and with their quarters. They bade farewell to professor Flitwick, who in turn convinced them to call him Filius. They then inspected their quarters. There was only one bed in each. Harry look at it, embarrassed.

"People might ask questions if I sleep in a camp bed on the floor," he said, desperately not making eye contact with Ginny.

"If we wear nightclothes, I'm not sure what's wrong with it," said Ginny. "Unless you want to sleep on the floor. We can pretend we're having marital problems." They both laughed.

The office was the same one Harry had been in nearly every year, although it was dismally bare. Ginny immediately began to decorate it in metallic gold and silver until Harry stopped her, asking if they wanted a theme, or to just decorate it.

“We should have a theme,” she said, her eyes dancing with mischief. “Something to really creep students out.”

“I agree,” said Harry, thinking that this year, or however long they spent ‘teaching’ together, would be very fun. “Maybe something really dark...”

“Not dark,” interrupted Ginny. “Something light. Like...” she grabbed a paperweight and transfigured it into a floor-to-ceiling mirror, leaning it against the wall.

“Impressive,” said Harry, nodding approvingly.

“All over the walls,” said Ginny. “Mirrors. That would freak me out, to get stuck in a room where the walls and ceiling were just mirrors...”

“And the floor,” said Harry. “No, on second thought, we should make it so that they’re walking over nothing...like that charm on the Great Hall ceiling...” he waved his wand several times, changing the walls and ceiling to seamless mirrors.

“We should put the ceiling charm on the desk, too,” agreed Ginny. “I’ll go ask McGonagall about the charm. You should get some mysterious objects to put around the place, like those queer metal things Dumbledore had in his office.” She walked into the bedroom.

“I’m pretty sure those actually did something,” called Harry, to Ginny’s laughter. “Maybe we should make a trip to Diagon Alley and buy some mystical objects and some teacherish robes.”

“Teacherish?” she giggled.

“Let’s just go.” he felt slightly giddy, slightly different from how he normally did. They were free to do as they wished, and he wanted to have at least a little fun teaching, if that only meant creeping out students who went to the office.

Ron and Hermione were all for a trip to Diagon Alley as well, although they hadn’t done up their office at all. Hermione had been very impressed by the mirrors, and Ginny had made the two of them promise not to steal the idea.

“Not fair!” Ron protested. “Look, you can’t use the mirrors and the Great Hall ceiling charm. We get one.”

“Fine. We’ll keep the mirrors,” said Harry. “You can use our idea, since you can’t come up with one yourself.” They laughed as they left the school, Hermione already spouting the knowledge she had concerning the Great Hall charm.

“So what exactly do you want to get at Diagon Alley, besides new robes?” said Ron. “And we should get really impressive robes, too, with, I don’t know, sparkles and things—” Hermione laughed, Harry and Ginny only a beat behind them.

Surprisingly—or maybe not—there were quite a few shoppers in Diagon Alley, obviously there for school supplies. They went to Madam Malkins only to find it full of Hogwarts students getting fitted for new robes, so Hermione led them down the street to Twillfit and Tattings instead, which was much emptier, as it didn’t sell Hogwarts robes at all.

“Do you think Snape will be at Hogwarts?” Harry asked quietly as they walked.

“ Nah. Flitwick said Slughorn was teaching potions. Snape’s probably a fugitive, just like in our world,” said Ron, sounding happy with this.

“Our robes should be white,” said Ginny thoughtfully. “To remind people that we’re defending against dark magic.”

“And you look really good in white,” added Hermione.

“Right, that too,” said Ginny happily.

They quickly discovered why Twilfitt and Tattings had a smaller clientele; it sold for nearly three times the price of most of Madam Malkin’s robes. However, Ginny immediately fell in love with an odd sort of white silk that had a slight gold sheen to it when the light shone on it. It would be three Galleons a robe, so they each ordered five with, as was becoming trademark, their animagus animal on the back in gold thread. Ron insisted on buying everyone cloaks to match with the fifty Galleons they had received each for taking the job.

“I don’t know if I have any shoes I can wear with these,” Ginny murmured to Hermione. Hermione agreed and the two girls quietly vanished into the shoe section of Twilfitts. Harry and Ron shrugged at each other and followed. Ginny and Hermione were examining white slippers. Harry and Ron wandered over to the men’s section and eventually picked out pairs of soft white boots, which matched the robes.

They met the girls back at the front of the shop, where they were presented with two pairs of white slippers with golden bead embroidery. They paid quickly and walked back out into Diagon Alley.

“If you want something weird, you might not find it in one of the big stores,” said Ginny, eyeing Gambol and Japes wizarding joke shop. “Maybe a street vendor will have something?”

They split up, Harry and Ginny going up the street and Ron and Hermione down, promising to use the tattoos to call each other if they found something pertaining to the other group’s office theme.

The first thing Harry and Ginny found was a vendor who sold semi-precious and precious stones. Harry didn’t particularly care if they were real or not; he was envisioning the things flying around in circles around the ceiling of the office. He mentioned the idea to Ginny, who loved it. They bought twenty of what the vendor claimed to be real

pearls, although Harry doubted it. As they were walking, Ginny voiced something Harry had been thinking about himself.

“Why are we taking permanent jobs at Hogwarts? I mean, if the book is something that could be anywhere, why keep ourselves tied down?”

Harry sighed. “The thing is, even if the book isn’t at Hogwarts, it might be in the home of one of the older wizarding families. It sounds heartless, but being a teacher might give us a way into those families’ houses or libraries. Maybe we’ll go to a parent’s house to discuss their child’s marks, or something.” He didn’t voice what that thought led to; what if it was in his own parents’ library?

Ginny seemed satisfied with this answer and they found another street vendor which sold metal rods (wonderful for holding or conducting magic!). Harry bought quite a few of various types of metal; he believed that they were really the type of metal the vendor claimed, whether or not they actually did conduct magic.

After an hour of fruitless searching, Harry tapped the lion tattoo on his arm with his finger and said, “Ron. Hermione.”

“Harry?” said Ron’s voice, followed after a moment by Hermione’s, right by Harry’s ear. “You done? We are. We’re at the Leaky Cauldron.”

“Right. We’ll be there in a minute.” He tapped the lion with his finger again. The lion stretched then walked up his arm and out of sight. A moment later Ginny was laughing as the face of a lion appeared on Harry’s cheek.

“Come on. The Leaky Cauldron,” he said, steering them that way.

They entered to see that Ron and Hermione already had a table. “We ordered drinks for you two,” said Hermione. “We thought maybe we should eat out here. It’s convenient, after all.”

“Sure,” said Harry, shrugging. “Did you get anything?”



They had, apparently. Ron pulled a glass globe out of his bag, which looked to have several smaller globes orbiting it.

“We’re putting it in mid-air above the desk,” said Hermione. “I’d say younger students are more easily impressed. Supposedly it’ll eventually grow an entire solar system, although I doubt it. What did you get?”

They showed her the ‘pearls’ and metal rods. Ron pulled one of the gold rods out of the bag, looking interested.

“What exactly are you going to do with this, mate?”

“Probably just set it hovering over the desk,” said Harry, shrugging. “If we leave a student in there for a while, we could make it hum as well. That would be nerve-wracking.”

“Maybe it could hum louder and louder,” said Ginny, giggling. “Then start vibrating, then stop the moment we come in. And if a student asks what it does, we can say it hums in the presence of someone untrustworthy, or something like that.”

The waiter came to take their order, and they ate without talking much. Harry was still mildly worried about what to do for the lessons, but Hermione insisted they couldn’t make any plans yet until they knew how good the students were. Harry knew that Hermione was right, and although he also knew he would be leaving this world in just a few months, he was nervous. He wanted to be a good teacher. Ginny smacked him with a pillow, waking him up abruptly. “What? What the...”

“I don’t know how you get up in time for school, Harry,” she said wryly. “You slept in again. Only four more days until term starts...” she smiled happily. “And we’re in the paper!” she tossed him the Daily Prophet. The headlines screamed their made-up names and the fact that McGonagall had finally found a teacher.

“Neat,” he said. It was a nice experience to see his name, even if it was fake, being put in a more favorable light by the press. “Do you want to go to breakfast?”

“Not in the Great Hall. We can just get an elf to bring it to us. Let’s get some work done on the metal sticks, and then I know that you and Ron have an exercise routine you’ve been slacking off on.”

Harry groaned, but got up. When he got out of the shower, Ginny was already in their office. She had changed the floor so it was mirrored, and changed the desk to a sort of mirrored lump that rose up out of the floor, divided into two for them both to have working space. She was currently sitting in one of the comfortable armchairs and trying to get the pearls to stay in the air.

“I have to hold the spell,” she said, frowning. “How can we get them to stay?”

“Here,” said Harry. “Just levitate them into the shape we want them, all right?” as Ginny did so, he cast the charm they had learned last year. “This is a Keeping. It keeps spells where they are without us having to use up energy to hold the spell.” Ginny dropped her wand and the circle of pearls stayed above, revolving gently.

“Now these...” said Harry, eyeing the rods. “Here, I’ll...” he stopped talking as he thought about what to do. “It would be good if I could bend one of these in a circle,” he said carefully. “I don’t know the incantation...maybe if I just...” he jerked his wand at the golden rod, which bent itself slightly, but not enough.

“Again,” said Ginny, looking intrigued. Harry jerked the wand with more force this time, causing the rod to bend into a perfect circle. “Now you levitate the silver one into the middle of this, then I’ll put a keeping on it...”

Two hours later, he and Ron met outside of the school in their exercise clothes. Ron had apparently been pushed out by Hermione, as well. As they began their run, Harry described what they had done with the office. They had bent most of the rods into appropriately

mysterious occult positions. It had been a lot of fun, although he knew he would look like a fraud to all the other teachers. They had even managed to get a charm onto one of the contraptions which made it hum when in the presence of someone wearing a Hogwarts student crest on their robe, getting increasingly louder and beginning to vibrate until someone wearing one of their white robes entered the room. They had had a lot of fun testing that one.

Hermione had apparently found a charm to put light into their odd golden globe, making it the only source of light in the room, which Ron thought made the room look mysterious and enchanting. Harry made a note to ask about the charm.

After running and weight training, the two began the rigorous martial arts schedule that was outlined in Kingsley's book. The two were barely at the level of an orange belt at the moment, but Ginny had commented a few weeks ago that it looked impressive just because they had their shirts off when they practiced.

After this, and a late lunch, Harry and Ron retrieved Ginny and Hermione and they all trooped up to the Room of Requirement for dueling practice and what Harry called "beating-up-Harry" practice, in which they all shot spells at Harry and he had to block them with either his glove or his sword.

The day ended with Harry knowing that they had spent it well. The next three days were fairly uneventful, but for Hermione dragging them all to the Restricted Section to search for the Horcrux book. They only managed to cover about half the books in all three days, with no results. Harry couldn't concentrate on the last day before term started, however; he would be seeing so many people he knew the next day...namely, himself.

They woke up bright and early on September the first, although the students wouldn't arrive until just before suppertime. Harry hadn't yet gotten over the shock of sleeping in the same bed as Ginny, despite both of them wearing very thick nightclothes. He rolled out of bed cautiously, then woke her with a pillow thrown from the other side of the room.

They had their breakfast sent up by elves as usual, then put the finishing touches on the Defense classroom. It had been very plain when they had entered it for the first time: they had put a dueling platform in the middle with all the appropriate markings on it, as well as several fake human skeletons that Harry had found in muggle London. Harry had animated them so they made small movements every once in a while. They had also painted the walls white.

Ron and Hermione were setting up another defense classroom in a similar way, though without the dueling platform, since for the most part fourth years and younger were too young to be dueling. Ron had loved the skeletons though and, despite Hermione's protests, had added as many as Harry had.

They went through the exercise routine as usual, though Ginny pointed out that they would have to do it in the Room of Requirement during the school year, as it wouldn't be a good thing for students to see their teachers with their shirts off. She said this in a slightly possessive tone of voice, making Harry laugh.

Finally, it was time to move down to the Great Hall as the students arrived. They all put on their robes and boots, or slippers in the case of the girls, and headed down to the Great Hall. They had showed the robes only to Professors Flitwick and McGonagall, both of whom had stopped by several times to talk to them. Flitwick had been very impressed by the charmwork on both offices, although both professors had seemed rather puzzled by the random instruments on Harry and Ginny's desk. They let Flitwick in on the fact that the instruments actually did nothing, but allowed McGonagall to continue to be puzzled.

They sat down at their set places at the head table, Harry feeling his nerves again. Ginny grabbed his hand and held onto it as students began to file in. He couldn't keep his eyes off the Gryffindor table, even when the Sorting began; he could see that head of unruly black hair facing the sorting, every now and then leaning over to comment to Ron, who would whisper something back. Eventually the boy turned around, feeling Harry's eyes, and Harry found himself staring into the emerald eyes of himself.

Harry looked away at the sorting quickly, and saw out of the corner of his eye his other self turn to mutter something to Ron, who said something back. Then they both turned to look at Harry. Ginny's hand tightened around his.

McGonagall stood to tell everyone that announcements would wait until after the feast, although without the usual flair Dumbledore had. Harry tried to concentrate on his meal during the feast, but it was hard, as people continued to point up at him and mutter. Not him, exactly—all four of them.

“Act naturally,” Hermione murmured beside him. “Or else you’ll never get their respect.”

“Oh, you’re the expert, are you?” he said nervously.

“Here, watch this,” said Hermione. She leaned over to Professor Sprout. “We were taking a look at that interesting tree you have on the campus here, Pomona. The one that attacks everyone who goes near it? What is it for?”

Professor Sprout turned and engaged Hermione and Harry in conversation about the whomping willow. On the other side, Harry could hear Ginny talking to Flitwick about keeping spells and the charms on the office. Maybe this wouldn’t be so hard after all, if he could learn to treat his previous professors as equals.

The remains of the feast faded away, and McGonagall stood, making the usual start-of-term announcements. She went over the Forbidden Forest, Filch’s forbidden list, then finally new teachers.

“And here we have, joining us from America, four new Defence teachers. Henry and Jane Anderson, who will be teaching first to fourth year defense, and Harold and Jennifer Evans, who will be teaching fifth to seventh year.” They received a round of polite applause. People continued to stare at them even after they each waved and sat down again.

“Didn’t their mothers teach them it isn’t polite to point?” muttered Ginny beside him, and Harry grinned.

“Apparently not. Look at those first years at the Hufflepuff table.” Said first years were gaping at him while another pointed. “What’s so interesting about me, anyway?”

Ginny leaned into his ear. “You’re ripped,” she muttered. “It’s the exercise that’s done it. You’re sexy, Harry Potter or Harold Evans.” She kissed him on the cheek as the benches scraped back, signaling the end of McGonagall’s speech.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” said Ginny as the four reconvened in Harry and Ginny’s bedroom.

“Did you see all those missing faces?” murmured Hermione sadly. “The Creeveys, the Abercrombies, Padma Patil...oh, Parvati looked absolutely haggard...I wonder what happened to Padma.”

Harry sighed. He, too, had realized that there were several familiar faces that were absent at the house tables. They would just have to deal with it. At least Hermione wouldn’t be teaching classes that were missing faces that they shouldn’t be, or at least that they knew of, anyway.

“So, any plans for tomorrow’s first classes?” said Ginny as Ron and Hermione left.

“I was thinking of maybe just running people through duels all class, just to see what they do,” said Harry.

“Good idea,” said Ginny, nodding. “What should we say as an opening speech?”

“How about, ‘I’m the defense teacher, do as I say or you’ll get it?’” Harry said. “No, I’m serious,” he protested as Ginny laughed. Harry stood outside the full classroom, taking a deep breath. They had opted for a dramatic entrance, and had it all planned out. It all hinged on one thing: someone not paying attention in the class. As

this was NEWT level Gryffindor and Slytherin, Harry was confident that someone wouldn't be.

He wondered if it was fate that had stuck him with the hardest class to deal with first. Maybe in this class he could get over his nerves, making it easier for the rest of the classes.

He let out the breath, smiling at the empty air beside him and letting go of Ginny's invisible hand. Then he steeled himself and threw open the door, which banged on the wall. Something stopped it from coming back and hitting him in the face, and he barely stopped himself from smiling gratefully at the invisible form of his girlfriend.

He strode through the classroom, pleased at the billowing effect of his white cloak, thinking of the way Snape had entered his first potions class. He turned around at the front of the class and smiled into the silence.

"Welcome to NEWT level Defense. My name is Harold Evans, and I will be teaching this course."

He picked the attendance up off his desk, scanned the list and looked around at the class. Yes, all accounted for. A surprisingly small amount of people had elected to take NEWT level Defense; Harry would have thought that they would have wanted to take it, considering the wizarding world's current state of war against Voldemort.

"All accounted for," he said to the paper which flipped off the clipboard. "Now. I understand that your teaching in this area has been quite fragmented. Tell me, does anyone here think that they have had sufficient studies in Defense? Just raise your hand, please." Nearly half the class raised their hands, including Neville, the other Harry and Ron, which Harry raised an eyebrow at. Neville, eh?

"Good. Glad to hear it. Would one of you explain the three Unforgivables to me, please? Mr...Potter?" he said, glancing at the attendance for show.

The other Harry looked stumped. “Unforgivables, Sir?”

Of course, this group wouldn't have had a Death Eater teaching them in fourth year. The real Moody would likely have been a little more restrained.

“Yes, Mr. Potter, unforgivables. Does anyone know what they are?” a few people tentatively raised their hands. Harry picked Seamus to explain the Avada Kedavra curse, and then stopped him as he felt a prickling where he knew the tattoo to be. Ginny was signaling him.

A note had been plucked from Theodore Nott's hands and was seemingly floating toward Harry. Harry grabbed it from Ginny and raised an eyebrow. “You and me, tonight, the Astronomy Tower? Is this defense material, Mr. Nott?” Nott stared at him challengingly. “All right. You think you know enough Defense to slack off in this class? You and another student who thinks he knows—Longbottom, I think—up on the dueling platform. Go on.”

The two students tentatively took their places on the dueling platform. He was about to instruct them to begin when another note floated toward him. He took it from Ginny and signaled. She drew off the invisibility cloak, allowing it to flow to the floor around her. The class stared.

“Weird bloke, isn't he? Harry read. “Thank you, Mr. Finnegan. No points off for now, but no more notes in my class. This is my wife, Jennifer Evans, and she will be attempting to teach this class along with me. Nott? Longbottom? Begin.”

It was, overall, one of the most pathetic imitations of dueling he had ever seen. Nott would cast a spell, then Neville would cast a basic shield charm, then a spell, and then Nott would cast a basic shield charm. Harry winced and sighed, wondering how long this was going to last.



“All right, enough,” he said, once both students were sweating. “Can someone tell me what was wrong with this duel?” no one said anything. Harry sighed, and glanced at Ginny.

“Are there any rules in dueling?” she asked the class, who mumbled something on the theme of ‘no’.

“All right. So why were the two of you waiting for the other to cast a shield charm and then cast at you before you cast another spell?”

Neville shrugged. “Er...”

“Any other volunteers, please?” called Harry. The other Harry tentatively raised his hand.

“Good. Mr. Potter. Five points to Gryffindor for actually volunteering for something. Do I need to pick someone else?”

Now that points were involved, everyone was volunteering. Ginny picked Daphne Greengrass.

The two got into dueling position. When the duel started the other Harry, apparently eager to prove that he had listened, fired off a Petrificus and then a stupefy in rapid succession. In his enthusiasm, however, both spells missed and he had to raise a shield quite quickly in order to block Daphne’s spell, an odd black jet of light.

The duel continued for a few moments more before the other Harry finally managed to get a stunner through and win. Ginny awarded ten points to Gryffindor for this, and the other Harry went smugly back to his seat.

At the beginning of the third mock duel, between Ron and Millicent Bullstrode, Harry somehow felt a spell coming at his back and instinctively drew the sword, in the process making both it and the sheath visible, and blocked whatever it was that was coming. Ginny, who had seen the whole thing, said coldly, “Detention, Mr. Potter. Come to our office after supper tonight. What were you trying to shoot at Professor Evans’ back?”

“Er...I didn’t mean to, Professor...” the other Harry squirmed.

“What was it, Potter?”

“Er...”

“We’ll discuss this tonight,” said Ginny, glaring. “Weasley, Bullstrode, begin.”

“That was awful,” said Harry, as the last seventh year filed out of the classroom. “I mean, I didn’t expect them to be as good as us or anything, but that first duel was really terrible.”

“Yeah,” sighed Ginny, leaning on him. “But look on the bright side; we have a student to put into our office for a little while tonight. We can test the humming stick thing.”

Harry grinned, but the grin vanished quickly. “Yeah, because he was trying to shoot a spell at my back. At my back! What was it?”

Ginny shrugged. “Something minor. I heard the incantation. One moment, I’ll look it up.” She left the room, heading to Ron and Hermione’s classroom, where they had the encyclopedia. She returned a moment later. “Hermione says the third years were pretty bad too. That hex he tried to send at you was totally harmless. Something keyed to turn your hair green in an hour or something. I guess that’s all we could expect, considering your prankster father is still alive here.”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah, I suppose. You were a bit harsh on him, weren’t you?” the fifth year Hufflepuffs and Slytherins were due to arrive in a moment.

“He was probably trying to set a yearly record for fastest detention,” said Ginny. “I gave it to him. He’s probably grateful.”

“Right,” Harry snorted.

Ginny hugged him. "You looked really distressed when you walked into the classroom and saw him. I was ready to throw off the cloak and give the speech myself."

Harry smiled. "Oh, and by the way, thanks for keeping the door open for me. If it had slammed back in my face..." they both laughed. The students began filing in and sitting down.

Harry went through much the same speech as he had with the seventh years. If he had handled Unforgivables in fourth year, they could in fifth. The fifth year dueling was slightly lower quality than the seventh years, although not by much. Harry resolved to turn the classes into something like the DA as soon as he could. These people wouldn't survive a Death Eater attack, even if it was one Death Eater against the entire class.

They went to lunch yawning, where even more people were staring and pointing at Harry, and he realized that he had forgotten to disillusion the sword again. The story of how he had blocked the other Harry's curse in the first class had traversed the school very quickly, and now people were looking at the sword in open awe.

"Seems that you thwarted a Potter tradition with new Defense teachers," murmured Hermione quietly as she sat down beside him at the Head Table. "He always turns their hair green. Done it ever since his first year of school."

"Huh," said Harry noncommittally. "He could have been less obvious with it."

"Right," said Hermione. "Was it non-verbal?"

"Er..." it had been, now that he thought about it. He had somehow...felt the spell coming at him, and reacted accordingly.

"So how were your first classes?" he asked Hermione, trying to ignore this odd fact.

“All right,” she sighed. “We didn’t exactly set them dueling like you did. Ours was a lot more chaotic. We just asked the third-years to produce a basic shield and you should have seen the things that happened. Someone blew this huge hole in the wall, I’m surprised you didn’t hear it. None of them understood that protego isn’t an offensive spell...” she sighed.

Ron appeared beside her, growling. “Wish we could have taken the older classes,” he said longingly. “It was bad enough dealing with them as a prefect, but now they expect us to teach them...” he groaned. “Any squeaks from the junior Death Eaters?”

“Nothing, actually,” said Harry, frowning. “I thought something would happen with Malfoy, at least...”

“I heard that you showed off your sword first lesson of the day,” said Ron. “Way to go, mate. Intimidate them before they get a chance to—”

“My other self shot a spell to turn my hair green at my back.” interrupted Harry. “It was instinct, all right? Especially after what you lot have been doing to me all summer.”

“But at least we got a chance to use our office of doom,” added Ginny. “I gave him detention.”

Ron sniggered. “Right. Ours is better, I tell you.”  
Father,

Our new defense teacher seems competent. However, you instructed me to keep you updated on anything unusual, and this morning in class the teacher known as Harold Evans revealed a sword that is rather similar to a picture you have shown me of Godric Gryffindor’s sword. He claims to have gone to school at the Salem Wizard’s Institute in America. His wife also appears to possess an invisibility cloak.

The first day has proceeded fine so far. I shall keep you posted on anything else that happens.

Draco

“Is he in there?” said Harry, eyeing the closed door of their joint office.

Ginny nodded. “There’s a peephole in Ron and Hermione’s office. Do you want to look in on him?” Harry nodded, and they entered Ron and Hermione’s office. It was an interestingly laid out office, and when they walked in it felt as though they were walking through space, on a floor made of nothing. If anyone were afraid of heights, this would not be a pleasant office to enter.

Harry put his eye to the small hole in the wall. He could see his other self shifting restlessly. The gold rod started to hum, and he jumped and stared at it suspiciously. It started to hum louder, and the boy backed against the wall. The rod started to vibrate, and Harry left to enter the office.

“Mr. Potter,” he said into the silence, as the humming ceased instantly. “I am aware of what you tried to shoot at me. Do you have a reason to think that you can get one over on your defense teacher? I am, after all, the teacher, and you are the student. Should this not have an effect on you?”

Harry mumbled something to the effect of “never did with Snape” then looked up sincerely. “I’m sorry about that, Professor. I’ll remember now that you aren’t someone to be trifled with.” The tone of voice and look was so sincere and apologetic as to actually seem false. Harry was willing to bet that it was, and had fooled dozens of teachers before.

He let it go for the moment. “Good. You will serve your detention tomorrow night with Mr. Filch. Have a good night, Mr. Potter.”

Once the other Harry had left, Ginny entered from their quarters and slung her arms around him. “You did great today,” she whispered. “It

must have been hard. I bet I won't handle it half as well when we get the sixth-year Gryffindors." She sighed. "You make a wonderful teacher, Harry."

He smiled down at her, taking her hand and leading her back into their quarters.

Dad,

Guess what? I beat your detention record. Destroyed it, actually. Twenty minutes into first class today (defense), thank you very much. The new Defense teacher seems like a decent type, although I didn't get the traditional hex onto him. He somehow sensed it coming at him, don't ask me how. He appears to possess a rather familiar-looking sword. Can you send me that book about Hogwarts' founders so I can compare Gryffindor's sword? Both Defense teachers are very young, barely out of school, I understand. You would be interested in them.

By the way, I know you asked me to keep an eye on Longbottom, but it's very difficult to keep him out of trouble. Twice today he challenged Slytherins to duels, even after he had to duel Nott in Defense, and everyone could tell Nott was holding back. I don't think I could keep Longbottom out of trouble unless I followed him around everywhere, and he already has Weasley for that.

Hope to see you soon,

Harry

Harry sighed happily as he read the class schedule for that day. No seventh years had classes today, although Ginny looked nervous about the sixth year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws directly after lunch.

They had gotten up much earlier than Harry was used to that day in order to complete the exercise routine before breakfast, and he couldn't stop yawning. Ginny finally hit him in the back of the head and told him that he couldn't appear exhausted in front of the students. After that, he did his best to keep his mouth shut.

They had assigned very little homework the previous day; a simple summary of where each student's defense ability was and what experience they had had. Harry was glad that they had at least one full free period every day to mark homework, or he wasn't sure if he could have kept up with the marking.

They entered the classroom loudly, silencing the fifth year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws. Harry went through the same speech, which was gradually becoming more polished and easier to present as he repeated it. He then asked this class about unforgivables as well. Surprisingly, they knew more than even the seventh-years had.

Romilda Vane stood up looking terrified of Harry and explained the Cruciatus curse with such detail that Harry thought that she might have known someone who had undergone it. Then one of the Ravenclaws stood and described the Imperius curse, ending by saying emotionlessly that her father had been under it. It was all Harry could do to keep from asking who her father was; after all, he was supposed to know.

When he asked about the killing curse, only one person raised their hand. Harry called on a tall Gryffindor, who said loudly, "Neville Longbottom survived it."

Harry sighed. "That's true. Now, Vane, Cornfoot, up on the platform, please."

“You ready?” muttered Harry to Ginny as the sixth year Gryffindors filed into the room.

“Does it matter if I’m not?” she murmured back, staring at the door. “You know, funny thing, I haven’t actually seen myself since we got here. I’ve been looking at meals and everything...”

Harry frowned. He had been looking too, and had not seen Ginny’s other self.

The class sat down and the chatter died away as Harry scanned the class. There was no sign of the Weasley red hair. He glanced at the attendance list, which he hadn’t had the foresight to check before. Ginny’s name was not on it.

He began the speech, feeling distracted. He could see Ginny’s eyes roaming around the classroom. She looked nervous. Even if her other self wasn’t here, these were her classmates.

“All right. Unforgivables, people. Does anyone know what one is?” this class, too, had more people than the seventh-years who knew about the unforgivables, specifically the Avada Kedavra curse, as Harry soon found out.

“Yes, Creevey?”

“Avada Kedavra. The killing curse,” he spat. “Bloody Death Eater killed my girlfriend last year using it.”

Time stopped for a moment, and Harry automatically turned to gaze at Ginny, who looked dumbstruck. Remembering that he was supposed to be a teacher, he said quietly, “I am sorry for that, Mr. Creevey. Does anyone have any knowledge of the other unforgivable curses?”

He barely listened to the accurate description of the imperius curse that he was getting from one of the Ravensclaws. So Ginny was dead here. Were more of the Weasleys? They hadn’t gone far enough up Diagon Alley to look at Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes. Did it exist



here? Was there a more sinister reason that Ron had been in Hogsmeade that one day? Was he the only surviving Weasley, that he had to live at school along with the orphaned Neville?

He managed to turn his attention back to the class, where Ginny was explaining the cruciatus curse. When she had finished, he said brusquely, "All right, Kirke and...Ackerley, up on the platform, please."

"I'm dead."

"Ginny..."

"I wonder how it happened? I mean, Avada Kedavra, yes, but how did I manage to get someone sending that curse at me? Ron's still alive, isn't he?"

"Gin, we aren't positive it's you who was Colin's girlfriend..."

"Who else could it be?" she whirled, staring at him. He was sitting on the bed, watching her face furiously around the room. "The only sixth year that we haven't seen that isn't confirmed dead, in Gryffindor..."

Hermione entered the room quietly. "Hey, Ginny."

"Hermione, I'm dead."

"Oh, Gin, I know. We heard it by accident from Pomona this morning." Hermione went over to hug Ginny.

"Think of it this way, Ginny," said Ron from the doorway. "All this means is that somehow, in some weird reality, you could have died. But you didn't, even if you did somewhere else."

"Right. Really comforting, Ron," said Ginny, glaring at him. "It's just...disturbing. Like being a ghost and seeing what people do after I die."

“Look, I know it must be really hard to teach yourselves,” said Hermione sadly. “I wish I could offer to switch now, but that would look a bit suspicious. And we really need to get into those family libraries. I’ve been doing research. Pretty much every old, rich pure-blood family has one. Malfoy should be the most likely candidate, I would say.”

“We have a library?” said Ron, frowning.

Ginny sighed. “Mum sold most of it to pay for Hogwarts tuition. It’s really small now, just one bookshelf.”

“Oh,” said Ron, looking crestfallen, then embarrassed.

“So what do I do, start failing Malfoy so that his dad calls me in to their house to discuss it? Won’t he just come here?”

“I doubt it. He’s a snob. He’ll want to show off his house. Besides, there’s still the library here and the head’s office. You might not need to get into Malfoy’s house at all,” said Ginny, looking determined now. “Come on, Hermione, let’s go finish with the restricted section.”

“Right,” said Hermione, looking bewildered at Ginny’s sudden change of mood, but never one to turn down a trip to the library.

Ron glanced at Harry. “So you have to fail Malfoy? That should be fun. All I get to work with is the ickle first-years who don’t even understand which side of the wand they’re supposed to hold.”

“Unlike you, who definitely never cast a curse on himself,” said Harry, raising an eyebrow. “Especially one involving slugs.”

“Hey, my wand was broken,” protested Ron. “Look, Harry, what’s going on between you and my sister?”

Harry blinked, startled by the abrupt change in topic. “Er, not that much, actually. I mean, we’ve kissed, but we probably haven’t gone as far as you and Hermione.” Noting the reddening ears, he said quickly, “Not that I’m trying to pry or anything...”

“No, it’s all right. Honestly...” Ron sighed. “I’m enjoying this. Pretending to be her husband. I like this situation, even though we’re in some weird other world where my sister’s dead and I’m some huge pile of muscle that stands behind Longbottom. You too, eh?” he said, nudging Harry. “Funny to see you as a sidekick.”

“Weird, definitely,” agreed Harry, who had noticed that his other self trailed after Neville all day. “D’you reckon that we should go help the girls?”

“Nah, it’ll look suspicious for all of us to be there,” said Ron, both he and Harry knowing full well that neither wanted to go research in the restricted section. “Let’s go to the Room of Requirement instead, maybe practice something with that book of yours.”

“Right.” Harry grabbed Kingsley’s book and led the way to the Room of Requirement.  
Draco,

I shall make my way to the school at the first quidditch match, earlier if possible, in order to see this teacher and possibly introduce myself to him as the head of an old pureblood family. Consequently, he may reveal the details of this sword.

Continue with Longbottom. The Dark Lord has begun a plan regarding the boy-who lived.

Lucius Malfoy

Ginny bounced into the office where Harry was reading over the summaries of what level the students were at. “The first quidditch match is September twenty-ninth,” she said by way of greeting. “Who do you think is seeker for the team?”

“Probably Neville, the way things are going,” muttered Harry. Neville was getting on his nerves. Despite his pitiful duel in the first class, his summary of how good he was at dueling was extremely overblown,

including several accounts of fights he had had with Death Eaters, and how he had come out on top.

That day in class, Harry had taught the fifth year classes the basic disarming charm, stunning spell and shield, all of which had been picked up easily by most of the students. With the sixth and seventh years, he had begun with more advanced jinxes, despite several seventh years bemoaning the fact that they were learning the same things as the sixth years, Harry thought that some of the younger students were more advanced. He wondered why the seventh years so lacked the ability to defend themselves, although to be fair several of the Slytherins and the other Harry were fairly good.

“Or you,” said Ginny, shrugging. “End of September is an early time for a match, though. They probably don’t have many new players to schedule one that early.”

“Who is it?”

“Gryffindor and Slytherin,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Isn’t the first match of the year always that? Oh, and Hermione wants us to come talk to Ron about something.” She grabbed his arm and dragged him through to Hermione and Ron’s room, the marking forgotten.

“Harry, talk to Ron,” said Hermione instantly when they entered. “He’s becoming the Snape of Gryffindor.”

“Hey!” protested Ron. “No matter what we’re doing, Snape can never be used as an insult. It’s a rule.”

“Says who?” asked Ginny disbelievingly. “Although it is a bit below the belt to call him Snape, Hermione.”

Harry snorted. “What did he do?”

“Giving points to Gryffindor and taking them from Slytherin for the stupidest reasons,” said Hermione. “This second-year Slytherin couldn’t cast an accurate expelliarmus and Ron took points off, even though half the Gryffindors couldn’t either!”

“You can’t do that, Ron,” said Harry, frowning. “I mean, I know you want Gryffindor to win the cup anywhere, even if it isn’t our world, but you aren’t suppose to care about the houses. We’re supposed to be from America!”

“Yeah, speaking of that, someone asked me about me accent,” said Ginny. “I told him that I’ve spent so much time in Europe that I’ve picked up the accent. We should all stick to that excuse.”

“Look, Ron, you don’t have to favor the Slytherins, but treat everyone equally,” said Harry, while Hermione nodded.

Ron actually looked ashamed. “Right. I’ll try not to favor. It’s hard, though.”

“Look, if Snape was still at the school I’d be doing it too, just to even it out,” said Harry bracingly. “But he isn’t. So we shouldn’t be favoring anyone.”

“Impedimenta!”

Theodore Nott froze, and the student Hermione smiled, looking satisfied.

“Good. Five points to Gryffindor. Mr. Longbottom, please?”

They had instated a challenge. At the end of October, Harry had said, there would be a dueling tournament among the seventh years. The winner would earn seventy house points. Consequently, the seventh-years were working very hard to learn new spells, each wanting the reward for their house.

The bell rang before Neville could do anything, and Harry walked over to Ginny gratefully. He had never before realized how much work teaching was, rather assuming that being a student was a great deal harder. He couldn’t imagine what it was like being a teacher like McGonagall or Flitwick, who had to teach all seven years.

They waited for the students to exit, then headed out themselves, Harry looking forward to lunch. They were on their way to the great hall when Harry stopped, hearing something in one of the concealed passageways behind a tapestry.

“Watch out, Theodore, he’s the boy who lived,” came the mocking drawl Harry knew to be Draco Malfoy’s. “Never know what he’s going to pull out.”

“Not so tough now, are you, Mr boy-who-lived, are you? The only time we can find you without Potter hanging over you—”

Harry sped over to the tapestry and wrenched it open, revealing Neville on the ground, disarmed and bleeding at the mouth, and Nott, Malfoy and Millicent Bullstrode standing over him.

“What is going on here?” he said as icily as he could manage. A very small part of him was amused and disgusted at Neville’s lack of ability to defend himself, or at least call a teacher.

“Well, it was like this, professor—” Malfoy went off on some wild story involving classwork and he and Nott helping Neville with his wand, but Harry wasn’t listening.

“Detention for all three of you, and fifty points from Slytherin for assaulting another student and lying to a teacher.” Behind him he knew Ginny was silently crowing at the chance to use the ‘office of doom’ as she had taken to calling it, again.

Harry James Potter woke with a start. He glanced around the dorm room quickly, noting the reason for his sudden awakening. Several of his dorm-mates had apparently decided to take a midnight jaunt around the school, and had left the door open. A cold draught was blowing in and over his bed, which was closest to the door.

He swore quietly, noting that Longbottom and Weasley were not in their beds. He reached down for his trunk with one hand and his glasses with the other, shoving them onto his nose.

His father, a high-ranking member of the Order of the Phoenix, had ordered him to keep an eye on Neville Longbottom, as the Slytherins appeared to be attacking him more than was usual this year. The Order was on high alert for any sort of kidnapping or injury attempt, but the members couldn't keep track of Neville all the time, and Harry was a ready-made guard.

He hadn't shown his real dueling ability in Defense. Far from it. He was needed as a bodyguard for Neville when they left school, and he had been trained for it for the past year. But the annoying boy was making his job much harder than it could have been.

His searching hands found what they were looking for: the Marauders Map and his invisibility cloak, neither of which he had ever shown to his dorm-mates. He didn't trust them enough. In fact, he had no real friends in Gryffindor Tower, or anywhere in Hogwarts for that matter.

James, his father, had written him just that day to say he would be inviting the new Defense Teachers to Potter Manor in order to speak to them about extra defense lessons for Harry.

He scanned the map. Neville and Ron were...yes, heading toward the kitchens. Neither had any apparent regard for their safety. And there were several Slytherins following...from both sides, ready to corner them!

He vaulted from the bed, tossing the invisibility cloak over himself and running out of the tower.

'Harold and Jennifer Evans' wandered toward the kitchens, Ginny leaning on Harry. It was nice to be able to wander the school halls at night without having to hide under the invisibility cloak. Harry had suggested simply ordering a snack to their room with a house-elf, but Ginny had wanted a midnight stroll to the kitchens, and since they were allowed, why not?

"Nott will catch the idiot when he comes round the corner. We only want to rough him up a bit. No need to break any limbs—"

Harry exchanged glances with Ginny, who mouthed, again? They rounded the corner to see the Slytherins closing in on Neville and Ron, who were looking cornered.

Harry halted Ginny before she went to stop it, wondering what exactly was going on to make the Slytherins target Neville this much- they had never done so with Harry.

“Out of bed, Longbottom?” sneered Malfoy in a very familiar way. “It’s against the rules. You need to be...punished,” he added with obvious relish.

“I survived the killing curse!” said Neville with far too much bravado in Harry’s opinion. “You think you scare me?” he eased into what Harry supposed was a very bad dueler’s position.

“Yeah, we do,” said Nott from behind Neville, reaching forward to pluck the wand from Neville’s hand.

“Expelliarmus!” Malfoy dodged Ron’s spell and sent a stunner back, knocking Ron over.

“Nice try, Weasley,” he snarled. “Now, Crabbe?” Crabbe reached forward to grab Neville’s arms. The hairs on the back of Harry’s neck rose, and he knew the spell was about to hit Crabbe before the boy keeled over.

“Who’s that?” whispered Ginny. “That spell came from empty air!”

“Someone with an invisibility cloak who’s really good with non-verbal spells,” Harry muttered back. “Maybe it’s me.”

“Should we stop this?”

“See how it plays out. I want to know what’s going on.” Harry turned back to the scene, where Malfoy and Nott were trying to duel with empty air and losing.



“You heard McGonagall though, Harry. We can’t get attached to anyone here. We shouldn’t do much.”

“Just because we can’t bring people back home doesn’t mean we can’t influence anything here. We could give our side a better chance at beating Voldemort here! Besides, we’re only helping out, not getting attached.”

Ginny’s eyes widened. “He got hit! We’ll talk about this later,” she added. “It is you. We need to interfere with this right now.” She strode out into the hallway in full view. “Malfoy, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, Parkinson! Detention once again, and if I see any of you assaulting a fellow student again I shall take it up with the headmistress. Up you get, Mr. Potter. And Longbottom.”

“No, you five stay here,” said Harry as the Slytherins made to leave. “I would like to know exactly what is going on.”

“We thought he was Peeves, sir!” said Nott, pointing at Harry. “And he was shooting spells at us, so we had to defend ourselves.” Harry raised an eyebrow. It was a good excuse, for being put on the spot so much.

“Really? And what were you doing to Mr. Longbottom before that? Moreover, why were any of you out of bed at all?” Ginny asked. Neville muttered something sheepish along the lines of “getting food” while none of the other students said anything at all. In fact, the other Harry looked like he wasn’t even listening; he had gathered his invisibility cloak, and a small square piece of parchment had fallen out of it. The other Harry was staring from the parchment to Harry and Ginny, looking bewildered, and Harry thought he knew what the parchment was.

Despite Ginny’s protests, he grabbed her arm and strode away, leaving several confused students behind, some more than others. Harry Potter stared from the Marauders Map to his departing Defense teachers, wondering what they were to not show up on the map at all.

“Ron! Hermione! Wake up!”

Harry's panic had barely been cut back at the amusement he felt at walking into Ron and Hermione's living quarters and finding them spooning.

"Harry, what the..." Ron suddenly realized what position he was in and jumped out of bed, his entire head going scarlet. Hermione opened her eyes blearily. "What's going on?"

"We forgot about the Marauder's Map!" his three friends stared at him, apparently not understanding the implications.

"How will we show up on the map? How is my other self going to react to seeing Harry Potter, Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley wandering around the castle? Either that or we won't show up at all, which would be just as suspicious. Even ghosts show up on the Map!"

"What can we do about it, though?" said Ginny, looking unhappy. "Steal it?"

When Harry didn't say anything, she swatted his arm. "Steal the Marauders' Map from your other self? Are you kidding?"

"Just until we decide to leave. Then I'll return it."

"How are you going to get into Gryffindor Tower, smart one?" said Ron, rubbing his eyes irritably. "And why did you wake us up now to tell us this? It could have waited until the morning."

Harry ignored him, thinking. "I can just wait outside the portrait hole for someone to come in, then follow them, can't I?"

"Yeah, right," said Ron. "That works for two people going in opposite directions through the hole, but you would have to be right on someone's back to get in behind them."

"All right, then..." Harry thought, but didn't have any ideas.

“You could just take the appearance charms off,” Hermione suggested quietly. “Find out the Tower’s password by waiting by the portrait, then take the invisibility cloak off and go in as Harry Potter.”

“But what if the other Harry Potter is in there?”

“I’ll be giving him detention?” suggested Ginny. “Conveniently, I already gave him detention tonight. For Monday.”

“All right,” Harry took a deep breath. “I just hope he hasn’t told anyone about this yet.”

Dad,

Is it possible for a person to disappear on the Map? For them to just not show up on it at all?

Harry

Lucius Malfoy entered the darkened room quietly, kneeling before the black 'throne'. He dared not make eye contact with the person sitting on the throne; anyone who did was severely punished.

"Lucius, my servant. How go things at the school?" the voice was high, cold and smooth, striking fear into the heart of anyone who heard it, no matter how many times they had before.

"Master, my son reports that the new Defense teachers have shown up several times to thwart them with Longbottom. Draco has been endeavoring to discover more about these teachers."

"And what has he found out?" the voice said silkily. Lucius cringed.

"Master, he checked the Salem school rosters for the past decade. These people "Harold and Jennifer Evans" were never there, nor was anyone with the name Evans. Of course, we are unsure as to the maiden name of the woman."

"I see." Lucius kept his eyes on the floor, waiting for the verdict.

"Master?"

"Keep your son and his friends at Longbottom. Tell them to be more discreet. As for the defense teachers...perhaps it would be a good idea for one to have an...accident. They are unknown factors, after all. Slip a note to McGonagall. Anonymously, of course. If it doesn't work, take more...direct action."

"Yes, master." Lucius began to back out of the room.

“And Lucius,” the voice stopped him. “Don’t allow your son to fail or be found out again. Crucio!”

“Come on, Longbottom.” Whack. “Bloody Defense teachers aren’t here to save you this time.”

Harry stopped outside of an unused classroom on the fifth floor, rolling his eyes. For people who were supposed to be so cunning, they really were quite clueless. Although they had endeavored to put a silencing charm around the classroom, but Harry had noticed it immediately and taken it off.

He wondered just how he had managed to notice the charm. A year ago, he wouldn’t have been able to, but now it seemed he could tell where spells were or when they were being sent at him, verbal or not.

He listened for a moment longer. It sounded like the Slytherins had resorted to muggle methods instead of spells. He finally gave in and entered the room.

“Your last warning has been long used up, Malfoy,” he said, taking in the scene. Neville’s nose looked broken and his mouth was bleeding. Crabbe was holding him and Malfoy appeared to be preparing for another swing. The four other Slytherins present were in various states of watching.

Malfoy looked up, glaring. He drew his wand from somewhere in his robes and snarled, “obliviate!”

Harry’s eyes widened as he instinctively drew the sword, blocking the spell. He then drew his wand with his left hand and shouted, “Stupefy!” three times in rapid succession. Malfoy dodged the first, but was caught by the second. The third flew to his left, hitting Pansy Parkinson.

“What the hell is going on here?” he shouted, enraged. He knew that Malfoy would have had little to no command over a memory

charm; it likely would have simply wiped the past year of Harry's life from his mind, if not the past decade.

"Er, sorry, sir," said Nott, looking as though he knew the situation was not salvageable.

"Right. Bring those two. We're going to the headmistress' office. Longbottom, get yourself to the hospital wing." The boy, dripping with blood, nodded miserably.

"Minerva, I'm not sure how much authority I have as a teacher, but if I was the head I would have this lot expelled," said Harry. Professor McGonagall was looking sternly at the six Slytherins in front of her. "I don't exactly know the precedent for attacking teachers, of course—"

"Thank you, Harold," said McGonagall, glancing at him. "I'll see what I can do." She eyed the woefully revived Malfoy, who was standing front and center. Harry leaned against the wall and watched. McGonagall first served tea to herself and the Slytherins, then sipped, leaned back, and began to question.

"You attacked a teacher without provocation, Mr. Malfoy. Do you have an explanation?"

Malfoy stared at her sullenly. "He was interfering in our business."

"And what was that business?" Harry admired the control in McGonagall's face. This Malfoy seemed somewhat different from the Malfoy Harry knew from his own world; more ready to fight and angry, if that was even possible. But right now he looked...vacant.

"Punishing Longbottom."

"Why?"

"My father told us to." He looked muzzily into the teacup he was holding. "Said it was part of the Plan." the capital letter was audible.

“What plan?” Harry asked sharply. McGonagall glanced at him, shaking her head.

“Dunno. We only know our part. S’gonna get the Dark Lord power or somethin’...”

“Are you going to do this again, Malfoy?” said McGonagall, her face hard.

“Probably,” the boy muttered. “Won’t let that git see...” he waved a hand at Harry.

“All right.” McGonagall stood up. “I find it necessary to suspend the six of you from school, pending further inquiries by the Board of Governors. I can’t expel without their authority,” she added to Harry. “You may continue to reside in the castle, but you are unable to leave the Slytherin common room unless a relative comes to remove you from the school. Meals will be brought to you.” She walked over to the fireplace and stuck her head in. “Horace Slughorn!”

After several minutes of hurried conversation between McGonagall and Slughorn, whom Harry assumed was head of Slytherin, Slughorn came through the fire to escort the Slytherins back to their house. Harry made to leave, but McGonagall stopped him.

“I have been meaning to ask you about something, Mr. Evans. I had planned to with your colleagues here as well, but just the one of you will do fine.” She picked up an enormous book with the title in gold on a black cover. Harry read it with a sinking heart. Salem Wizards and Witches, 1534-1997

“Mr. Evans, neither your name nor the names of your colleagues appear within this book. Would you care to explain this to me?”

Harry sighed, thinking furiously. “Ah, would you like me to go fetch my colleagues to explain this?”

“I’d rather you didn’t, Harold. In this way I can check that your stories are all consistent.”

“All right. But first,” Harry thought for a moment, “I’d like to know what was in that tea. I know Malfoy...Malfoy’s type. They don’t just open up like that.”

“A minor truth potion. I know Malfoy’s type too, you see. I know he is working for the Dark Lord already, but I have no evidence. Since I know of his loyalties, however, I have no qualms about giving him whatever I want to drink. Not as strong as Veritaserum, of course, but strong enough to make him spill his secrets.” She glared at him fiercely. “Now tell me why I can trust you, Harold. Tell me why I shouldn’t remove that part of your memory that I just granted.”

Harry stared at her. The McGonagall back in his world would never have given a student a truth potion. This McGonagall seemed so much more...ruthless. Harry wondered what had given her need to walk with a cane. The world was apparently more dangerous here. He could use that.

“Well...the thing is, Minerva, that we know the situation in Britain,” he said, taking a seat in one of the vacant chairs. “We have heard enough about the Dark Lord. We would like to help with the situation, and there is one particular thing that we are searching for.” He took the plunge. “Minerva, have you ever heard of a Horcrux?”

She nodded carefully, keeping her eyes on his. He sighed and stood up again, walking over to one of the shelves on the far side of the office under the pretense of looking at one of Dumbledore’s old silver instruments. He tapped the lion tattoo and muttered, “Ron. Hermione. Ginny. Keep quiet, but listen to the story I’m about to give.”

“Listening,” whispered Ron, appearing to hear the urgency in his voice.

“Us too,” he heard from Ginny and Hermione, as though they were whispering in his ear.

“What was that, Mr. Evans?”



“Nothing,” said Harry. “Just looking at this...what is it?”

“The Horcruxes, Mr. Evans?”

“Yes. Right. Lord Voldemort has several. Six, I believe.” Aside from a slight intake of breath, she still said nothing.

“We are searching for the horcruxes, and a way to destroy them. However, we need an occupation, a reason to be here while we search. We cannot tell anyone who we really are, but I will tell you this much. None of us ever went to a wizarding school,” he said, inventing wildly now. “We were homeschooled in various ways, meeting by accident in America two years ago. Of course, we do spend much of our time in Britain, which is why we would like to help with the situation and find the horcruxes.

McGonagall’s eyes were wide. “Six horcruxes?”

“Do you see our reason for being here?” Harry said, feeling guilty. They would be leaving as soon as they found out how to destroy the horcruxes, not staying and helping with the search.

“I understand,” said McGonagall. “Now, if you don’t mind, I will check your story with your other colleagues. Is Jennifer really your wife?”

“Yes,” said Harry carefully.

“I’ll check with them, then,” said McGonagall, making her way to the fireplace. “Jennifer Evans!” she disappeared in a whirl of green flames.

“That was a damn good story for having to make it up in about ten seconds, mate,” said Ron, clapping him on the back.

“All I did was tell her most of the truth,” protested Harry. “I just...substituted America in for our world.”

“Pretty good job, though,” commented Ginny. “Especially since you know nothing about America.”

“And that was really good thinking, to connect with us before you started telling it,” added Hermione. “But why were you in her office? What happened with Malfoy? She mentioned...something...”

Harry quietly outlined what had happened on the fifth floor. He finished by describing what McGonagall had said about the truth potion.

“She seems even more different than I thought when we first met her,” Harry commented. “Harder, I mean. Our McGonagall would never have slipped truth potions to her students, even Malfoy.”

“After so many more years in the war, she would have to be harder,” sighed Hermione. “It’s sad, isn’t it.”

“Suspended?” she voice was dangerously quiet, and even colder than usual. “When?”

“Three days ago, master,” said Lucius Malfoy, cowering.

“Crucio!” the spell was held on him for nearly a full minute before the Dark Lord’s anger was sated.

“What happened with the Defense teachers?”

“We slipped a note to the Headmistress, as you said, my Lord,” panted Malfoy. “I believe they had words, but McGonagall seems all right with it...”

“Crucio!”

When the spell had let up for the second time, Voldemort said coldly, “Bring me one of the teachers. I wish to know who they are.”

“Yes, master,” said Lucius, groveling. “I will see to it immediately.”

“Class is a lot easier without Malfoy’s stupid comments in the back of the room,” commented Harry happily. “I hope he gets expelled, if only so that I never have to talk to him again.”

Ginny laughed. “And guess what? We got an invitation.” She leaned forward, brandishing a piece of parchment. “To Potter Manor, in exactly one week, to meet the Potters.” Harry paled.

“My...my parents?”

He had thought it would be harder to ease into the role of teacher, especially for his own classmates, but it had actually become quite easy. He found it easier, now, to treat the teachers as equals and call everyone, even his previous friends, by their last names. He still had a bit of difficulty taking or giving points, but it was getting easier.

Actually meeting people who were dead in his world—more so his actual parents—would be harder to handle. Much harder.

“You can do it, Harry. You’ve been doing fine so far.”

“I don’t know, Gin...I wouldn’t know how to act.”

“Act like you’ve been for the whole school year.” She said, sounding confident. Harry wished he could be so confident about pretending to be a teacher to his own parents.

“That’s only been two weeks!” he protested.

“So? You’ve been doing great. Come on. I’ll be there too. I’ll help.”

Harry sighed and sat back. “I’ll go, but I’ll screw up.”

“Of course you’ll go,” said Hermione from the door. “Ron and I are going to the Zabini household next weekend, and that’ll be a lot less pleasant, I can tell you. But they’re-well, just she, I guess--she’s supposed to have a huge library, and we need to get into it.”

“Blaise Zabini is in seventh year,” said Harry, frowning. “Why are you going?”

“He has a younger sister in third year, whom we’re failing for no real reason,” said Hermione.

“Ouch. Look, I’ll do it,” he sighed. “I think they might see right through me, though. I mean, we might not look seventeen...”

“And we’re not acting like it and you know it,” interrupted Hermione. “Look, if you had walked in on Malfoy and his cronies beating up Neville a year ago, would you have pulled what you did today and dragged them all to McGonagall, or would you have attacked straight away?”

“Probably attacked,” said Harry grudgingly. “But still...my parents...”

“Whom, I hate to say it, but you’ve never met them,” said Hermione. “If you can manage to act like a teacher with your best friends, you should be able to with people who are technically complete strangers.” Harry winced at this.

“I suppose,” he said doubtfully. “Don’t argue anymore, I’ll do it,” he added, holding up a hand as Hermione opened her mouth again. “I just won’t like it.”

He glared at the Fat Lady, three hours later. The other Harry was in detention, and he was ready. All he had to do was wait...

Colin Creevey came along approximately thirty seconds later. “Hippogriff,” he said to the Fat Lady, and Harry silently followed through the portrait hole, under the invisibility cloak.

The common room looked exactly the same, and he was overcome with a wave of...what seemed like homesickness, but he knew it wasn’t. He technically was home. There were just a few differences—the furniture was in slightly different places, there were several faces he didn’t recognize...

He walked quickly up the steps to the boys dormitory, wanting to get it over with. When he entered, Ron was on the bed reading a book about Quidditch tactics. He looked up at the opening door.

“Harry? Is that you?”

Harry frowned. Obviously Ron knew about the cloak. He drew the hood down.

“Yeah. Ron, I need the Map.”

“What map?”

Harry opened his mouth, then shut it. “Uh...right. Sorry.” He walked to his bed.

“What are you doing with Neville’s stuff?” asked Ron, starting to get up.

“Oh, sorry...got a bit disoriented for a second there...”

Ron peered at him suspiciously, with none of the usual friendship Harry was used to, seeing Ron’s face. “Are you sick or something?” then, to Harry’s immense relief, he pointed to a bed that Harry was used to seeing Dean in. “Your bed is over there. And I thought you had detention?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, thinking fast. “But...I needed parchment and quills. Lines, you know.” Ron looked satisfied by this, and Harry walked over to the mentioned bed and began going through it. Dad,

SOMEONE STOLE THE MAP! Ron said I came in while I was in detention and went through my bag, grabbed some parchment and left. But I never did. Someone must have been using Polyjuice, but why would they want the Map?

Harry

I'll still do it, he thought hard, staring at the fireplace exactly one week later. Ginny would be there in a moment, and then they could leave.

Dumbledore's, or now McGonagall's private library had yielded no result, and McGonagall had revealed that Dumbledore had given several volumes away to prominent pureblood families as goodwill gifts after their children had been killed in the war. Harry had asked whether he had given any to half-bloods or muggleborns, as they were far more likely to be killed in the war, but McGonagall had said that they had received other gifts; a muggle family would have no use for a magical gift.

Ron and Hermione had come back from the Zabini's empty-handed, Ron raving about Ms Zabini's beauty and Hermione glaring at him. In fact, the only progress they had made in the past week was Hermione finding a spell that could pinpoint books that contained certain words, and they had used this to good effect on the Zabini's enormous library, finding no books that contained the word horcrux, although Hermione commented that there had been some extremely questionable-looking books that would certainly have belonged in the Restricted Section.

The Potters' invitation had been very polite, merely expressing Lily and James' desire to meet their son's new teacher, who was spoken so highly of by their son and his friends. Harry was not fooled; he knew the other Harry must have written to tell them about the sword and Harry's thwarting of Malfoy's attacks on Neville, not to mention how easily he had stopped the other Harry's hex on the first day of classes.

Ginny appeared in the doorway, smiling. They were both wearing their formal white robes. They had taken to wearing standard black robes for most classes, but Ginny had decided that they should look fancier tonight.

She grabbed his hand and squeezed it reassuringly. "You ready?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Yeah."

She let go of his hand and walked forward. "Potter manor!" she cried. Vanishing into the floo. Not waiting for himself to lose his nerve, he quickly grabbed some floo powder and followed.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Evans.”

Harry stared into the eyes of his own mother. It was like staring into his own eyes in the mirror; he knew he looked different now, but...

“You as well, Mrs. Potter,” Ginny cut in smoothly. Harry shook himself and held out his hand to shake.

His mother looked...like a combination of himself and Ginny, actually. Her hair was slightly darker, less vivid, than Ginny's, though, and she had fewer freckles. She looked something like she had in the pensieve memory he had witnessed two years ago, but older, more mature.

“Harry has told us so much about you. You came from America? You don't seem to have an accent...”

“We've been here quite awhile, Mrs. Potter,” recited Harry, as they had agreed before, still mesmerized by his mother's eyes.

“Please, call me Lily. Oh, where are my manners...come in, sit down...”

She led them into a formal-looking sitting room, out of the floo fireplace room. The theme appeared to be red and gold; Harry grinned at the Gryffindor colors, feeling a sense of home already. The walls were a pale yellow that contrasted sharply on red curtains, which were open, revealing a large quidditch pitch outside. Harry sighed. This was what his life would have been like had Voldemort not existed...

The door opened, and James Potter stepped in.

Harry was struck speechless.

She had seen this man before; he hadn't remembered when he saw Lily. He now remembered that he recognized both from the Mirror of Erised in his first year.



“Harold Evans,” he heard himself say. “You must be Mr. Potter.”

The small talk began. Harry let Ginny take the lead, preferring to sit back and stare at his parents. They both seemed very happy, James constantly joking around and Lily laughing softly. He and Ginny stuck doggedly to their story when asked about their “past”.

At some point a house-elf arrived and brought wine. Harry selected a white wine at random, not having had much experience with alcohol before, aside from getting Hagrid and Slughorn drunk last year. He sipped the wine cautiously, barely keeping himself from coughing as the first mouthful went down.

They moved to a dining room that was as extravagant as the sitting room had been. The house-elf returned, serving a delicious roast, and the difficult part of the evening began.

“Our son tells us that you have a remarkable...ability to sense spells, Harold,” said James, leaning forward. Harry frowned slightly, wondering how to answer the question. He finally decided on the truth.

“I’m not entirely sure about that myself, actually. It’s an ability that’s fairly new to me...useful, of course,” he added, glancing at James. “I’m told I broke your son’s little...tradition?”

Lily had the grace to look embarrassed. “I’ve tried to stop them doing that,” she said abashedly. “You’re the first teacher who’s been able to stop it, actually. That’s one reason we asked you to come here today. You are really the first teacher we’ve really been interested in.”

“Any other reason?” asked Ginny curiously.

“You are an enigma,” said Lily quietly. “Every other teacher Harry has had we have known, or has come from somewhere within wizarding Britain. But you come from overseas, into a war-torn country, to teach at a school where it is not just rumored, but practically assured that your post has a jinx on it. Why?”

There followed a long silence, in which Harry exchanged glances with Ginny, trying to wordlessly ask each other how much to tell. Harry finally indicated for Ginny to tell what she saw fit.

“We are...helping Minerva McGonagall with a special task,” began Ginny. “Well, really, she is helping us. We need access to the resources at the school; Dumbledore’s private library, not to mention your restricted section. Albus Dumbledore had one of the rarest collections of books on the planet.” This little tidbit they had learned from McGonagall while searching.

“We are searching for a book that could possibly remove Lord Voldemort’s immortality, leaving him a mortal man.”

Harry glanced at Ginny. He had seen Lily and James start when they heard the Voldemort’s name, most likely out of surprise at hearing someone else utter the name, not fear.

“I see,” said Lily, scrutinizing them. “I wasn’t aware that Lord Voldemort was a large concern in the States yet.” She voiced it partly as a statement, partly as a question.

“We have relatives in Britain,” said Harry carefully.

“Oh?” asked James. “Evans? Because Lily—”

“On Jennifer’s side,” Harry interrupted, not wanting to go down that road quite yet. He was still unsure of whether or not to reveal himself to them before they left. After all, they had their own son. It wasn’t the same situation as Ginny, whose parents would likely love to see her alive and well.

“Anyways, we had heard about the situation here,” said Ginny into the silence. “We thought we knew of a solution, and came to present it to whoever looked to be a key part of the resistance. Minerva McGonagall looked the most trustworthy, as well as having access to places we needed to search.”

“And have you had any luck finding this book, yet?” asked James. “What is it, anyway?”

“That is confidential, I am sorry,” said Ginny, glancing at Harry.

“Why?” asked James brusquely. “We could help, you know. We have a lot of influence in Britain, if I may speak plainly. We—”

Lily laid a hand on his arm, cutting him off. “Is there a good reason?” she asked, her voice betraying nothing that she thought.

“There is,” said Harry, his voice mirroring hers. There was a good reason. After McGonagall, there was no one they needed to tell about the Horcruxes. If Voldemort got wind that anyone was working to destroy them, he would likely do his best to either make them safer, or worse, make more. Besides, if Dumbledore had not seen fit to take anyone into his confidence about the Horcruxes, Harry saw no reason to. Even if they were leaving this world, there was no reason to make it worse.

“I see.” She gazed at him for a moment, her eyes searching his. Then, “You have permission to search our library for this...book. Although I do hope you choose to take us into your confidence...perhaps later on?”

Harry could only nod.

She stood. “I’ll take you right now, if you wish.”

Harry leaned back in the sole armchair in their room and sighed. They had had no luck with the book, but that wasn’t anywhere near the front of his mind right now.

“So what did you think?” Ginny asked quietly, appearing from their office. She jumped onto the bed and lay down, reminding him of nothing so much as her animagus form. “Your...parents?”

Harry stared at the ceiling. “They seemed really formal. I don’t know, it’s just that I didn’t think they would be so...”

“You were meeting them as their son's teacher, not their son,” Ginny said into the pause. “That's really all you can expect from a pureblood family. There are a lot of old formalities that haven't died out yet. If you had gone to, say, the Malfoy's, it would have been a lot worse.”

“Yeah. Yeah. But the house...wow. There was a quidditch pitch in the backyard! Imagine...I dunno. I can't even imagine growing up like that. A house-elf and everything. Don't tell Hermione about that, though.”

“Don't tell me about what?” asked Hermione from the door. She walked into the room. “How was it?”

Harry left Ginny to explain what had happened. He smiled to himself as Ginny skipped the part about the house-elf. She was right. He would never really know his parents if he came to them only in the role of ‘mysterious teacher who is helping in the war against Voldemort but has no other connections.’

“Hermione? Ginny?” the two girls looked up. “Do you think we could...just before we leave...maybe tell them who we are?”

Neither girl had to question what he meant. Harry knew Ginny had to be feeling some sort of longing to reveal herself to her family now that she was presumed dead in this world.

“I don't know, Harry,” said Hermione hesitantly. “I mean, we don't know what their reactions would be. Especially the Weasleys...they would probably want to keep Ginny here.”

Ginny looked back and forth between them, then shrugged. “We're still a long way from leaving. It's not even Halloween yet and we have to keep looking for the book. Eventually the portal will close on us, won't it?”

“Yeah, after a year or something. That's still a long time,” Harry protested.

“Not long enough, if we keep going this way,” said Hermione, and with that cryptic statement, she exited the room.

“One of the most important aspects of a duel is to be unpredictable,” said Harry, pacing back and forth in front of the seventh-years and feeling like an utter fool. He was sure that at any moment someone would call him out as a fake. But the class seemed to be listening attentively and when he glanced at Ginny she nodded and winked.

“I’d like to see you try to duel again today, now that we’ve had a little practice with other spells. First we’ll have...Nott and Potter.”

“Professor?” Blaise Zabini’s hand was raised. Harry pointed at him.

“Would one of us be able to duel you? Just to see what someone really good would duel like, I mean,” he added, smirking.

Harry sighed. He was sure he had shown no favoritism, but maybe it was something inborn in him that made Slytherins hate him. He looked at Ginny. He most definitely didn’t want to duel one of the seventh-years. One would probably beat him, and then the little respect they had for him would be gone.

Ginny seemed to read this in his eyes and stood. “Maybe if you all actually prove you’ve learned something so far this year, one of us might duel you by the Christmas break. But right now, Potter, Nott, get up here.”

Harry walked over and sat beside her as the two students got up on the dueling platform. “Thanks,” he whispered to her. “If I dueled one of them, I’d probably lose.”

She frowned. “Bollocks,” she whispered back. “You were a better dueler than this lot by your second year. Remember the dueling club?”

He smiled and turned his attention to the stage. The two traded Expelliarmus and Protego for a few minutes, then finally got creative, using some of the jinxes Harry had shown them. Harry frowned as

Nott tossed a cutting curse at the Gryffindor facing him, but didn't interfere as the other Harry dodged it.

The duel ended when Nott stopped Harry with an impediment jinx and casually walking forward to remove the wand from his fingers. Ginny stood up.

"Ten points to Slytherin for winning the duel. And five to Gryffindor for putting up a good fight, Mr. Potter."

"That's not fair," Ron protested. "Nott used a curse that you didn't approve. He should be disqualified."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "When you're fighting Death Eaters, they're not going to stay to my approved list, are they? Another ten points to Slytherin, Nott, for getting the point of the lesson. Being unpredictable." Nott smirked, sauntering back to his seat.

"That's not fair," said Ron loudly. "You're favoring him."

"If Potter had done the same thing, I would have awarded him the points," Harry snapped. "Are you going to stand around arguing that the Death Eater didn't play fair if he casts an Unforgivable on you?"

The class was silent, and Harry realized that he had shouted. Ginny, for once, didn't step up to fill the silence.

"So you're saying that we should just be as ruthless as the Death Eaters?" asked Neville suddenly. "Should we be using Unforgivables too?"

"I didn't say that, Longbottom. I said to be prepared for them. And you should be," Harry added, staring around the class and feeling like Mad-Eye Moody. He had half a mind to shout, "Constant Vigilance!" as the old auror always had, but he restrained himself. He could see that many of the class were nodding at what he was saying.

"You were excellent," said Ginny as the four reconvened in the Room of Requirement. "You should have seen him, Ron. He was just like Mad-eye. They were all so intimidated." She smiled.

“Why did you have to be the idiot, Ron?” Harry grumbled. “Why couldn’t it have been Parkinson or something?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Ron, frowning. “That person wasn’t me, Harry. Keep us separated. I’m way smarter.” Ginny and Hermione laughed, and after a moment Harry did too.

“You’d think they would have had more training, though,” said Harry thoughtfully. “I mean, look how much longer Voldemort’s been here.”

“Yeah, but no one started a DA,” said Ron. “That’s part of it.”

“Yeah...”

“Are you thinking of starting a DA?” asked Hermione, leaning in from where she sat.

“Are you crazy, Hermione?” asked Harry incredulously, staring at her. “I’m barely keeping up with this teaching business as it is as well as looking for that bloody book. I can’t start a DA. Maybe I can, I dunno, drop a hint to Neville or the other Harry that something should be started where this lot can work outside of class. But I can’t do it myself.”

“I suppose. What do you do with your spare time right now?” asked Hermione doubtfully.

“Oh—you know—research, and things—” Harry mumbled, reddening and glancing at Ginny, whose ears were flaming.

“You lot ready?” Ginny heard as she walked back from the kitchens. Being able to walk the Hogwarts halls after curfew definitely had its benefits. But that voice definitely didn’t sound like it was allowed. It sounded like Nott.

She drew her wand, unsure of where the voice was coming from. This was the group that had been troubling Neville before. Ginny had no doubts that they had ulterior motives, and that they hadn’t given

up whatever they were doing since Harry had intimidated them and gotten Malfoy in trouble.

She was amazed that Harry had done that. It was so uncharacteristically...mature of him. Not that she thought he wasn't always mature...most of the time. He had kept an impressive rein on his temper since they had arrived here, and it was attractive.

She was sure he hadn't noticed when their month passed, although Ron might have. But none of the four had brought it up and she hoped that it would stay that way. After carrying on this charade for so long, she would be staying until the end, no matter what Ron had to say about it. She didn't want the fight that it would provoke if someone brought it up, though. In any case, she couldn't just disappear; it would bring up awkward questions with "The Andersons" and "Harold Evans".

She drew her wand, glancing around. The voices sounded close. Did they know she was here? Were they attacking Neville? Someone else?

"Stupefy!"

"Protego. Impedimenta." She reacted instantly as a tapestry opened and a figure dressed in a dark cloak appeared from the wall to her left. She recognized the voice and height as Nott's. He was followed by four other figures, one significantly taller than the others.

"Stupefy."

"Stupefy."

"Crucio."

She dove away from the taller figure. This was not student; no student would dare to cast the cruciatus curse on her, besides, that voice sounded familiar...



She had no time to think about it; they were all aiming their stunners at her again. She couldn't keep this up. She cast a shield, then tapped the tattoo on her arm. "Harry! Help!" she called, throwing up another shield as the first faltered. What was going on? Should she change into her animagus form? No...it would be just as easy to hit a big cat with a stunner, and she wouldn't have a wand.

Three stunners hit the shield at once, two of them removing it and the third getting through and hitting her. She fell into icy blackness, hoping that Harry had heard her call.

Harry sat grading fifth-year essays on the importance of physical fitness in dueling when he heard the tingle in his arm that signaled someone connecting to him through the tattoos.

"Harry! Help!"

He shot to his feet. "Ginny?"

She said nothing. "Ginny? Ginny!"

He grabbed the Marauder's Map from the desk, where he had kept it wiped. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good!" he shouted at it, and for once the map seemed to sense his urgency and appeared immediately.

Ginny was nowhere on the map, but that was normal. None of them showed up. But over near the kitchens, Three students out of bed...Nott, Crabbe and Goyle. And another name with them.

Lucius Malfoy.

Harry shot out the office door and ran through the halls. It seemed like miles to the kitchens...

He didn't need to get to the kitchens. The Great Hall doors were opened and four shadowy figures were dragging a clearly recognizable fifth figure out. Harry cursed.

"Impedimenta! Stupefy!"

Two of the figures turned and threw up shields. His spells bounced off and hit the walls, drawing an, “oh, I say!” from a nearby painting.

The other two figures were out the door, closing it behind them. Harry cursed, then turned his attention to the two who had stayed; it looked like Crabbe and Goyle, although he couldn’t tell for sure because of their black cloaks.

If they were anything like the two in his world, they would be easy to beat. He hoped so. He needed to get through.

He concentrated and conjured a bear. It was what they had been working on in the Room of Requirement for the past two weeks.

“Oppugno!”

The bear ran at the two boys, who looked to be frozen in fear at something they clearly hadn’t expected. Harry took the moment of distraction to Stun one of them, leaving the other to be savaged by the bear. He couldn’t summon any sympathy; they had tried to kidnap Ginny.

The doors were locked.

“Reducto!”

A Harry-sized hole burst through the door, and he stepped through, sprinting almost before he was entirely through the door. He saw the jet of blue light coming at him too late, and was lifted up and slammed into the wall. He crumpled, falling to the ground and the world blackening as he heard hazy shouts from behind him and the roaring of the bear he had created.

He woke slowly, seeing nothing but white.

“I think he’s waking up, Madam Pomfrey.” Hermione’s face swam into view. She looked gray with worry. She looked like she had been crying. “Stay down, Harry. You’re hurt.”

Madam Pomfrey bustled over. Harry tried to sit up, but she pressed him down. “It should only be about an hour, Mr. Evans. That was a very nasty curse you got hit with—slammed you into the wall so hard. It broke every one of your ribs.”

“How?” asked Harry incredulously. “Every one?” it didn’t feel hurt, but for a slight soreness. “I’m fine. You must be wrong. I have to go after her. Where is she? Did you get her?”

Hermione sighed, a shadow passing over her face. “No, Harry. It’s only been one night, and McGonagall is going to interrogate Crabbe and Goyle as soon as they wake up.”

“Huh? Wake up?”

“The bear, Harold. You did quite a job with that.” Hermione gave a small smile. “It was quite...vicious with them.”

“Where are they?” asked Harry, looking around the hospital wing. “I’m going to—”

“Nothing, Mr. Evans. You are going to stay here until I say you can go off after your wife. I’m not going to stop you from doing that, heavens, no. Mrs. Evans came to talk to me in here a couple times. Wonderful woman. But right now I need you to lie still.”

Harry finally subsided, lying still on the bed. He looked at Hermione. “How’s...” he couldn’t remember Ron’s assumed name.

“He’s fine.” Hermione said. Then her face crumpled slightly. “He...had to be Stunned. He wanted to go after her, and wouldn’t wait to find out where she was. Then he found out about Crabbe and

Goyle and tried to strangle them with his bare hands. It was...terrifying. Stupider than what you did."

"What?" Harry said indignantly. "I was fine."

"You walked out into an ambush. You should have expected them to wait for you to come out. You wouldn't be injured like this if you had thought."

"What? I didn't see you helping!" Harry shouted, incensed. "Where were you?"

"Asleep," said Hermione levelly, staring at him, hurt in her eyes. "It isn't my fault that the only person Ginny called didn't help her. Don't blame me." And with that, she walked out of the hospital wing.

Nearly an hour passed. He stared listlessly at the wall as Madam Pomfrey fussed over him and forced potions down his throat. Finally, she freed him.

"I do hope Mrs. Evans doesn't come to harm," she called after him as he strode out of the hospital wing. "Good luck!"

That was the other good thing, he thought, as he broke into a jog, heading toward McGonagall's office, about being a presumed adult. People didn't try to hold them back from the fight. They were actually encouraging him to go.

He reached the Head's office in record time, to find McGonagall, Flitwick, Slughorn and Hermione there already, as well as Ron's Stunned form slumped in a chair. All but Ron were huddled over one of the silver instruments that rested on the desk.

"Anything?" asked Harry loudly, causing them all to turn his way. McGonagall looked weary.

"We think we know where they got to in general." Flitwick looked haggard. "Albus never really showed any of us how to use these before he died. All we know is that they can somehow track

apparition and portkeying, but none of us can get anything detailed out of it. We have a ten mile vicinity somewhere...here.” They had drawn the area over a large map of Britain. Harry stared at it.

“Who lives there?”

“Pomona just went to find that out,” said McGonagall. “She should be back any moment. Make yourself comfortable, Harold, and we can discuss rescue tactics.”

“How can we do that if we don’t know where she is?” asked Harry rudely, sitting down. Hermione glared at him, and McGonagall sighed.

“Please try to cooperate, Mr. Evans. I know she is your wife, but acting like this will do nothing to help her. In a moment—”

The door opened, and McGonagall stopped. Professor Sprout walked in, holding a piece of paper. Harry grabbed it, drawing more glares from the teachers.

“Malfoy Manor,” he muttered, glaring at the name on the parchment. “I should have known.” McGonagall looked at him sharply, and he inwardly punched himself. He shouldn’t have known. He wasn’t supposed to know the Malfoys past Draco.

“I’m going right now,” he said, his mind made up. The Malfoys had made just about enough trouble in his life. “Is anyone else coming?” his voice sounded odd, like he was listening to it from somewhere outside of his body. Malfoy. How dare he? Not to go after Harry, to go after his girlfriend...if she was hurt...

“Just one problem, Mr. Evans,” Flitwick’s squeaky voice punctured the red rage which was rising in Harry, driven by the beast that lived inside his chest. “Malfoy Manor is at the center of that ten-mile area, and the entire place has an anti-apparation ward on it. It’s quite customary for pureblood families, but you may have trouble if you choose to walk from the border.”

"I won't walk," said Harry distantly. "I'll run." He looked hard at the area on the map, wanting to be there, and disappeared with a pop.

He arrived in the middle of an empty field. Several grazing horses looked at him in alarm, and then went back to the grass. His knees buckled, and he sat down for a moment. His vision rolled and began to black out, but he tried to concentrate on the horses. He couldn't black out. Ginny needed him...

He woke with Hermione slapping him, not lightly. He supposed she was a bit angry about his earlier barb concerning who had helped Ginny.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," she muttered. "You are such an idiot, Harry. Are you trying to sap your own strength?"

"Huh?"

"Come on, Harry. You just Apparated right through the wards at Hogwarts. You need to be at full strength if you want to try to take on all the Malfoys and whatever Death Eaters might be there, however stupid that idea is. You know that. Think." Her hair was disheveled and she looked furious. Harry cringed back. The rage hadn't left. It was simmering just below the surface. He stood up, shaking her off.

"I feel fine, Hermione. Are you coming with me or not?" a thought occurred to him. "Do you think I can apparate into the Manor if I can get through Hogwarts wards?"

"And black out right in front of a bunch of Death Eaters?"

"Fine. Are you coming?"

She sniffed. "I'll follow behind, but I know I can't keep up with you in lion form. That's what you meant, right? When you said you would run?" Harry nodded shortly.

"Well, first I would try her on these," said Hermione, tapping the owl tattoo, which had flown down to her hand. Harry cursed himself for not having thought of it. He tapped the lion with his wand.

“Ginny Weasley. Ginny? Gin?” nothing. He glanced at Hermione, whose eyes glistened. “I’m going.”

“All right, Harry. I understand. I’ll catch you up.”

He changed. The transformation came easily now. It didn’t feel so odd to be in the lion’s form. He angled toward where he could feel the anti-apparation wards in effect, and began to run.

The landscape around him blurred as he ran, or it may have just been the tears in his eyes. What would he do when he got to the manor? Would he just march in, guns blazing, or should he try to sneak?

Perhaps a disillusionment charm at first, he decided. Just to get into wherever Ginny was, and they could get out together. The point of this was to rescue her, not exact revenge on her attackers...

But he wanted to.

In what seemed like mere minutes, a huge house loomed ahead of him. For a moment, Harry allowed himself to be slightly jealous of where Malfoy had apparently grown up. The gardens that he was running through now were immaculate, and the house was made of what looked like shining gray marble. There was a statue of an unpleasant-looking man standing prominently in front of the house, glaring down at the golden lion running at it. Two men in black guarded the door beyond it, but both looked completely unprepared for a random lion attack. Harry growled the leapt at one, slamming him against the gray wall. The other cast a stunning spell at him, which he dove under, knocking the man off his feet. Harry jumped behind a marble pillar, changing instantly back into a man.

“Stupefy!” the man slumped down and Harry caught his breath, and then quickly cast a disillusionment charm on himself. The fight had been uncomfortably loud, and people must have heard.

He proceeded cautiously into the house. The first room he entered was an enormous hall with several smaller passages leaving it.

Portraits lined the hall, and Harry had the sneaking suspicion that some had seen him come in and cast the disillusionment charm on himself. Sure enough, at least three portraits had abandoned their frames and gone somewhere else. He had to move fast. Where was Ginny?

He glared at the three passages in front of him, and then took the middle one. As soon as he was out of sight of any of the portraits, he tapped the tattoo with his wand again. "Ginny Weasley," he said clearly. Still no answer. He thought about her. Maybe he could sense where she was through the tattoo. He closed his eyes and spun. When he opened them, he was facing a solid marble wall, but he remembered another passage heading the way he was facing.

He headed back into the main hall and noticed three figures in black robes looking around.

"Finite Incatatem!" the incantation was uttered, surprisingly, by a portrait directly in front of him. It was unpleasantly surprising when a jet of red light actually shot out of the portrait and hit him, removing the Disillusionment Charm.

"Avada Kedavra!" Harry brought the sword up, blocking a Killing Curse for the second time in his life.

"Reducto! Diffindo!" he called, all the while running toward the three with the sword raised. One of the figures was hit by the cutting curse in the arm. Harry didn't watch as one of his arms fell to the ground, completely severed.

Several more killing curses were shot at him. He dodged one and blocked another with the sword, still running. Reflexively, as he reached the man with the severed arm, he brought up a leg and kicked him in a part of the head which rendered him immediately unconscious.

"Impedimenta!" he fired off five of the curses in a row, catching both men. He stunned them both, then bound them, disillusioned them and moved them into one of the side passageways.



Panting, he eyed the passageway he had turned toward when thinking of Ginny. It was worth a try.

He lost track of time as he ran down the dim hallway. He assumed people were following him, so he didn't change into lion shape. He didn't want to be caught off guard by a killing curse he couldn't block.

He tried the tattoo every hundred steps, but never received a response. Still, he had an overwhelming feeling that he was heading in the right direction. And something was wrong with this hallway. Something had been done to it to make it...longer than it actually was, it seemed. However large Malfoy Manor was, it couldn't possibly have one passage over a mile long...

“Crucio!”

He stopped, standing stock still. There was not a door in sight, but he could feel magic slightly stronger than the regular wards coming from his left...

He turned. “Finite Incantatem,” he muttered as loudly as he dared. The plain stone wall disappeared, revealing a black door. He reached out and turned the knob. It was unlocked. Obviously no one had expected anyone to be able to...hear...

He stopped for a moment, thinking. There was a silencing charm on the room. He could tell.

Had he heard through a silencing charm?

Laughter from behind the door, and he jerked it open.

His eyes scanned the room and analyzed the situation in seconds. Ginny, lying on the floor, her robes tattered, twitching and screaming. Blood streaming from a dozen places on her body. Above her, MacNair with a wand in his hand, laughing as she screamed. Behind MacNair, Dolohov, stroking a bloodied knife...

The redness rose up and blinded him, leaving him with an absolute certainty regarding what had to be done.

He drew the sword while MacNair and Dolohov were still slowly turning. Everything was crystal clear in his vision, and moving very slowly...

Ginny became aware that the pain had suddenly ceased. She stared up through the haze at the figures in the room...there seemed to be more of them...

Her vision sharpened as the last effects of the Cruciatus receded. Harry was here, and with a look of thunderous rage on his face...

She smiled.

He drew the sword. She heard the ring as it came out of the sheath.

Dolohov threw the knife. She knew how accurate he was. He had shown her, and Harry's hands were both full...

He lifted his leg and kicked the knife away. His momentum carried him closer, and while Dolohov was pulling another knife from somewhere around his person, Harry brought the sword down and lopped off his arm. In the same movement, he brought up the sword and blocked the Killing Curse sent his way by MacNair, then spun and punched the wand out of the Death Eater's hand with his wand-hand. He took one step back, glaring at MacNair critically, then...

"Deleo!"

Ginny looked away from the carnage, but Harry was already turning back to Dolohov.

"Diffindo!" Dolohov fell, his eyes wide. Ginny tore her eyes away from his cut throat and looked at Harry, who was panting slightly. It had all happened in less than a minute.

She stared at him, at the rage in his eyes receding, and being replaced by...something else. Something that made her face heat even as she smiled at him.

“Can you walk?” he muttered hoarsely. She stood up shakily. Dolohov hadn’t gotten anywhere important with his knife yet. She glanced down, seeing his disembodied arm on the ground, leaking...

She hadn’t eaten in twenty-four hours, and she had definitely rid herself of all food long before Harry had gotten here, so she wasn’t sure exactly what she threw up. She felt Harry’s gentle hands holding back her hair, and when she was finished, he carefully led her out of the room. He conjured her a cup of water, which she drank gratefully, washing out her mouth. He then looked at her bleeding wounds and cast several basic healing charms on them, of the type they had learned from Hermione back at the Burrow. She stopped bleeding, her cuts sealing up.

“I’m going to disillusion us,” he said quietly. “You ready?” she nodded carefully.

They got about ten feet down the hall when the attack caught up to Harry, and he threw up much more violently and colorfully than she had. After drinking his own glass of water and cleaning out his mouth, he waved his hand and wandlessly threw up a silencing charm around them. She stared at him, or what she could see of him.

“I just killed two men,” he said flatly.

She saw a tear leaking out of his eye and ran to him, covering his invisible mouth with hers. She was crying too, she knew. He held onto her, shaking, as they kissed. She pulled away after a moment.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said fiercely. “This is a war, Harry, and I think we’ve finally realized it. We’re going to need to be harder, more willing to kill, to do what our enemies do. Do you think those men back there would give a damn if they killed you, or would they have just gone back to torturing me? They deserved to die, Harry. They deserved it.”

“I still feel...” he didn’t complete the sentence.

“If you didn’t feel something, I’d be afraid,” Ginny continued. She had to stamp out this guilty attitude quickly, before it got rooted within him. “But you do. Killing them wasn’t fun. It isn’t enjoyable, like it would have been if they had killed us. But it was necessary. You understand?” she was close to him, and emphasized her last few sentences by jabbing him in the chest with her finger. “Don’t you dare regret it, Harry. Don’t enjoy it, but don’t you think it’s unnecessary, either.” With that she banished the silencing charm, and they continued.

When they got to the main entrance hall, three black-clad attackers were waiting for them. Ginny glared at them fiercely. Harry was already running.

“Diffindo. Reducto. Deleo. Evanescio.” Harry engaged two of the Death Eaters, taking one out at once, but one got around him to aim at Ginny.

“Avada Kedavra!” he shouted, pointing his wand at her. She barely thought about it, but she could hear Harry scream as she dove to the side, away from the curse.

She conjured a stone wall to hide behind as Harry ran toward the Death Eater that had attacked her, barely stopping to block the curses sent his way with the sword. Ginny aimed and shot a Destroying spell at one of the Death Eaters.

They hadn’t found out exactly what the destroying spell did, but from what was happening here, it looked as though it simply blew up the body part of the person that was hit, creating a colorful mess.

Harry looked impossibly angry, running toward the Death Eater that had tried to kill her. The look on his face was terrifying, but at the same time it warmed her that she could cause such an expression of protectiveness.

Her jaw dropped when the sword whipped around and decapitated the Death Eater. Harry looked rather disturbed at the gore as well. Some had hooked onto the sword and whipped him in the face. Ginny came out from behind her wall, letting it vanish behind her, as Harry removed the mask from the face of the man and gasped.

“What?” asked Ginny, running to him. She vaguely recognized the man as one who had been brought to Hogwarts by Malfoy last year; he was huge and blond, with a cruel face.

“I left him here before I came to get you,” Harry whispered heavily. “These attacked me when I got in, and I Stunned them, and bound them.” He turned around and looked at Ginny. “I should have killed them,” he said, looking horrified. “I left them here alive, and one of them nearly killed you. I can’t let that happen, ever again.” And suddenly they were kissing again, passionately. His tongue slipped inside her mouth and they moved closer together, clutching each other as if for dear life, in a world that was sweeping them away.

She didn't know how they managed to get out, transform, and run, but five miles out they met Hermione, who looked at them both as if trying to decipher what had happened. She clearly knew something was different. Ginny had to restrain herself to keep from bursting into tears as they told the story. She wasn't sure why. She wasn't the one who had killed, after all...

Hermione looked from Ginny to Harry. Ginny prayed that she didn't say something all too sympathetic to Harry, but she was pleasantly surprised.

"Good work, both of you," she said quietly. "Go back, have a hot bath. Get the blood off you. I'm going to Malfoy Manor." As Ginny tried to protest, Hermione held up a hand. "You didn't check the Library, and this is our most promising house. You rushed off before we had a chance to tell you, Harry, but McGonagall had a good lead that in one of the raids on Hogwarts, Malfoy took a book from here on Voldemort's orders. This could be the end of our search."

Harry looked at her hopefully. "It could?"

"You're not coming," she said blatantly. "I can cast a disillusionment charm just as well as you, and it's not that hard to beat someone in a duel when you're invisible. Now go get some rest. You look like you need some."

"It's five more miles!" protested Harry. "You won't get there and back in time!"

"In time for what?" she smiled mischievously. "Besides..." she suddenly shrank, turning into the owl, then back into Hermione. "I finally got it. Something showed me how. I'll be back by nightfall." While Harry and Ginny were speechless, she changed again and winged off toward Malfoy Manor.

They ran four more miles and were almost at the edge of the wards when Ginny stopped, whined, and transformed, walking quickly over to a nearby tree. Harry followed her, unsure of what she was doing.

It became clear when she found the bodies of Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle inefficiently buried by leaves under the tree. They exchanged glances.

“Hermione,” whispered Ginny, and Harry nodded. He thought there had been something a bit different about her, the way she hadn’t been horrified by the killing the way he thought she would have...had it been this that had given her that attitude? Had it been this that had finally helped her find her animagus form?

“We have to get back,” he whispered back, unable to look away from the bodies. Crabbe’s throat had been cut by what looked like a claw, and Harry guessed that Hermione had been transformed at that point. Goyle was...surrounded by vomit, clearly his own, and had obviously been the victim of the Destroying curse.

“She used that curse we found in the book in Knockturn Alley,” she said slightly louder. “The one that makes you...” she waved her hand at Goyle. Harry didn’t complete the thought. He didn’t need to. Hermione had more courage than he had ever thought before. He wouldn’t have had the nerve to use dark magic, even when necessary...well, he wasn’t sure about that now...

“I’m going to Side-Along Apparate you,” he said quietly. “Ready?” she nodded carefully, and he gripped her arm.

They somehow stumbled up the path to Hogwarts, through the halls, and toward the Hospital Wing. Students stared at them as they passed, but Harry glared them off. They entered the Hospital Wing to find it empty.

“Head office?” asked Harry quickly. “Or do you want to sleep?”

“I’m not sleeping while Hermione’s out there,” said Ginny firmly. “Here...” she strode over to the store cupboard and withdrew two vials of green potion.

“Stamina potion,” she answered to his unasked question. “So we can wait up for her.” Harry nodded and downed his in three swallows,

wincing at the taste. He immediately felt energy begin to seep back into his body. He felt more alert, like he could stay up all night.

It was, in fact, night, he noticed, as they walked sedately down the hall to McGonagall's office. They had been at Malfoy Manor for a while.

They knocked on the gargoyle, which promptly leapt aside for them, faster than it ever had before. It didn't even prompt them for a password. Harry frowned. Something was not right. He glanced at Ginny, who was staring at the gargoyle in confusion.

"Mr...Evans." Harry looked up when the door to the Head Office opened, to see McGonagall looking at him angrily. "Could you please explain something to me?" Harry exchanged worried glances with Ginny and followed McGonagall into the office.

It became clear what McGonagall was talking about when he saw Ron, lying on a clearly conjured couch in the middle of the office. His illusions were off and he simply looked like his usual self. Harry looked at Professor McGonagall.

"As happy as I am that you retrieved your wife," she nodded at Ginny, "And she appears to be in good shape, I must ask you why, when I sensed magic around Mr. Anderson here and cast Finite Incantatem, his eyes changed color. And then his hair." She suddenly pulled out her wand.

"Finite Incantatem!"

Harry was unprepared, and moved sluggishly. The sword came up slower than it usually did, and at an angle; the spell was not absorbed, but diverted to Ginny, whose hair changed color as well. Harry pulled out his wand.

"Expelliarmus!"

McGonagall made no move as her wand flew out of her hand into Harry's. Her eyes narrowed, but she stayed still.



“Who are you? If I wasn't able to recognize you in your regular appearance, you wouldn't have cast illusions. Is this really Mr. Weasley?”

They stood like that for nearly thirty seconds, then Harry looked away. What could they do? He couldn't cast a proper memory charm. Besides, the portraits in the office were watching him like hawks, and he wouldn't be able to memory charm them even if he could.

“All right, Professor,” he began warily. “We don't come from America. We're from Britain.”

She listened. Ginny had her wand pointed at McGonagall the entire time, but Harry thought it was a bit unnecessary. The Headmistress didn't look like she was about to attack either of them. Ginny looked particularly fierce with a small scar that Harry hadn't been able to fix spanning from the left corner of her mouth to the bottom of her left eye.

When Harry finished, McGonagall sat down heavily in her chair. The portraits continued to watch Harry.

“May I see you?” she said finally. “With no illusions?” Her face softened. “I always thought Ginevra Weasley would grow into beautiful young woman.”

Harry waved his wand, banishing the spells for both of them. Minerva simply stared for a moment.

“You're different,” she said at last. “Harry. You look more adult than ours. Like you've been through much more...but you have, haven't you?” she stood. “Where is Miss Granger?”

Harry glanced at Ginny, who said, “Can you wake up my brother? I'm sure he'd like to hear this as well.”

They woke Ron, and had to explain why McGonagall knew. Worse was that they had to explain that they had let Hermione wander into Malfoy Manor by herself, looking for a book. McGonagall helped by

explaining that she had told Hermione of a lead that they had found on Malfoy Manor, but it took nearly ten minutes to convince Ron not to go after her. After he finally was convinced, he stepped back and stared at Harry and Ginny.

“You’re different,” he said flatly. “Both of you. Something happened out there that made you change. What was it?”

Harry stared for a moment, wondering how he knew. But since they were telling secrets right now...

“I killed, out there,” he said, his voice cracking slightly. “I killed five men. I...slit the throat of one, and chopped off another’s head, and...Vanished one man’s heart...” he stopped for a moment. He hadn’t told Ginny what he had done to kill the first man they had met in the entrance hall.

He was suddenly enveloped by a pair of slender arms, and was surprised to note that it wasn’t Ginny. It was McGonagall. She pulled back after a moment.

“You’re very mature, all of you,” she whispered. “But you’ve never really experienced war, have you? You know how to duel, to fight, you know how to strategize and teach and lead...but there are some things you can’t teach yourselves. Some things you have to learn from experience.” She sighed. “No matter what world you come from, I look after my Gryffindors. And you need a cup of tea and some sleep.”

“I’m not sleeping until Hermione gets back,” said Harry immediately.

“Neither am I,” chorused Ron and Ginny. McGonagall shook her head wryly.

“You have all demonstrated your maturity to me, and I don’t see you as students, although you are still only sixteen, Miss Weasley. But I must ask you...if Hermione finds this book, will you be going home?”

“Yes,” said Ginny flatly. “We’ll wait around a while to learn exactly how to destroy a Horcrux...I mean, we can’t bring the book back with us....but we have our own war to fight, Professor. We don’t need to get caught up in another one.”

“And you have already helped beyond measure, by explaining the Horcruxes to us,” McGonagall said. “Will you be revealing yourselves to your families before you go?”

Ginny closed her eyes for a moment, and then opened them. “No,” she said. “My family is back in my own world, not here. It would only give them more pain for me to appear to them for a little while, and then leave.”

“My parents already have a son,” whispered Harry. “I don’t...” he sighed. “You understand?”

“Ron? Harry? Ginny?” the voice came out of the air, making all three of them jump. McGonagall frowned at them, not understanding or hearing the voice.

“We’re here, Hermione,” said Harry in a low voice, rolling back his sleeve to bare the tattoo. “Do you have the book?”

“I have it,” she said back. Ron punched the air silently and Ginny kissed Harry on the cheek.

“But?” said Harry, sensing that there was a but.

“They know I was the owl,” she said. “They’re following. Tell McGonagall to expect Death Eaters at Hogwarts. I don’t know if this attack was planned and just moved ahead because of me, but there’s going to be an attack. Get ready. I’m almost there. Can you open a window?”

“We’ll open the one in the Head Office,” said Ron immediately, running over to the wall and wrenching the window open.

“Thanks. I’ll be there in a moment. I have to change.”

Harry looked at McGonagall. “Death Eaters. On their way. Now.” Ginny tossed McGonagall her wand. She snatched it and ran out of the office without another word.

Harry marveled slightly at the speed at which Hogwarts was changed from a school into a fortress. Professors Flitwick, McGonagall and Vector had vanished outside and a few minutes later the school wards had sprung into visibility as a shimmering wall, completely enclosing the school. At the same time the passageway behind the one-eyed witch had been opened into a gaping hole, something Harry hadn’t realized it was capable of, and what looked like the entire population of Hogsmeade was filing into the school, looking as if this was something that had been practiced.

He questioned McGonagall about it. She responded, between instructing portraits to watch the various entrances for a breach, that when Voldemort had returned, James Potter had immediately foreseen attacks on Hogsmeade and shown the passage to Dumbledore, who had in turn showed it to McGonagall before he died.

“Isn’t that a bit dangerous?” asked Ginny, arriving with their battle robes, which Harry took gratefully.

“It’s guarded at all times,” McGonagall said distractedly. “Order members. I assume you know...of course you do.”

“Will the wards hold?” Ginny asked tentatively.

“It’s been nearly a year since we had to test them against Death Eaters,” McGonagall responded. “They held last time, but all they really need is a good curse-breaker...we’ve been guarding all the best...trying to recruit them to our side...” she glanced at them. “The regular teachers have positions to defend, or if they aren’t fighters, children to guard. I trust you four to find somewhere for yourselves to be useful.” Harry saluted.

After the Headmistress had left to hold her position, which was a vantage point above the main entrance hall, Harry contacted Ron and Hermione.

“Where are you? Are you ready to fight?”

“Ready and suited up,” Ron responded. “We’re at the dungeon point with Slughorn. He says the wards are weakest there, though he isn’t sure any Death Eaters know. We’re here just in case. If the fight starts up there, let us know, all right?”

“Right,” said Harry, closing the connection. He looked at Ginny. “Everywhere seems to be covered. Where...”

“Go back to the office,” she suggested. “Get the Marauder’s Map. We can figure out where we’re needed most from there.”

They began jogging in the direction of the office. Harry thought about how well Hogwarts was defended compared to the Hogwarts in his own world. The job of the teachers was merely to hold off the Death Eaters and detain as many as they could until help arrived, which would likely be within moments—the Ministry fighters would simply Apparate to Hogsmeade. The students were well-used to doing this; they had been drilling for it for years.

Harry scanned the map when they reached the office. Yes, all the students were in their common rooms...except one...two...

“What is that little git doing?” Harry swore. Neville Longbottom, followed by Ronald Weasley was heading down to the entrance hall.

Ginny glanced at the map over his shoulder. “We need to get down there. Wait...” her finger traced a passageway, the one behind the one-eyed witch. “three students out of their Common Rooms...” Draco Malfoy was heading down the passageway. He had a brief encounter with the dot marked Alastor Moody before moving on.

“Must have gotten him from behind...” Harry muttered, knowing what they were going to have to do and not liking it. He looked at Ginny, who appeared to understand.

“I’ll take Neville,” she said. “You go get Malfoy.”

Harry nodded and gave her a quick kiss before sprinting out of the office. Did the wards cover the passage? He hoped so.

Ginny picked up the Map and pocketed it. She would likely need it again. Neville and Ron were still moving steadily toward the Entrance Hall. She broke into a run. How could that boy be such an idiot? He wasn’t anything like Harry. What had been different in their lives, that Harry could be so wonderful, yet Neville could be such a ponce? Ginny had had to stop herself from laughing at some of his performances in class. She had been better than that in her third year.

She jumped down a flight of stairs four stairs at a time, then slowed herself down and caught her breath before moving around the corner to see Ron and Neville. Both had their wands out.

“What are you two doing here?” Ginny asked angrily, trying to channel McGonagall and her mother into one voice. Neville looked at her angrily.

“We’re here to help! I’m sick of you teachers keeping me out of the fight! I can help!”

“We can fight,” agreed Ron fiercely. “Don’t you think? Haven’t you seen us in class?”

Professor McGonagall appeared at the top of a stairwell, looking at the two boys in shock. Ginny waved her away, and McGonagall gave her a warning glance. Ginny could read the message in that look: Get them back NOW.

“I have seen you in class, and I know neither of you can fight worth a damn,” she said harshly. Expelliarmus! She thought hard. Two

wands flew into her hand. "Look at that. You think you can stand a moment against a Death Eater?" the two stared at her mutely.

She couldn't send them back to the common room. They would leave again. She made a quick decision.

"Come with me." She walked off, knowing they would follow; she did have their wands. She led them to the office she shared with Harry.

"Get in," she said brusquely. She tossed their wands in, trying to think if she had left anything important in the office. "Stay in there until I come and get you and decide your punishment," she said angrily. She began to close the door, but Neville placed himself in the way.

"Stupefy!"

She ducked, enraged. She didn't have time for this. Malfoy could be leading Death Eaters into the school at that very moment. Harry could be in danger.

"Accio wands," she said calmly. "Incarcerous. Stupefy." She slammed the door shut when she was sure the two were well tied up. "Coloportus." She turned and ran toward the third floor, wondering how Harry was faring.

Harry made it to the One-Eyed Witch in record time. He stopped to catch his breath and draw the Sword of Gryffindor. He supposed there was no need to hide it now.

The passage had been closed again. Harry opened it with a tap of his wand, sliding down quickly. He began a quick jog up the long passageway, not wanting to tire himself. He stopped when he found Moody's unconscious body.

"Enervate."

Moody shot up, looking around. "Where is he?"

“Go warn McGonagall that Malfoy got out,” Harry ordered, looking up the passageway.

Moody swept his eyes over Harry appraisingly. “Why don’t you do that, lad. I’ll follow the boy.”

A moment later he found the sword of Gryffindor at his throat and Harry’s eyes inches from his own. “I don’t have time for this,” Harry hissed. “You go warn her. You’re the one who was taken down by a seventeen year old.” He removed the sword. “Go.”

Moody moved off along the passage, waiting until the strange man had turned his back. His voice had sounded oddly familiar. In fact, his face had looked rather familiar as well. He supposed most people at a school wouldn’t notice it, but he had received top marks in Concealment and Disguise...

He followed the man carefully, angled his wand in the right direction, and thought as hard as he could, Finite Incatatem! When nothing happened, he tried again, this time with results.

He gasped.



She turned a corner and ran faster, her red hair billowing out behind her. Adrenaline was coursing through her veins, fueled by the rage she had felt when Neville had tried to stun her.

“Ginny?”

She stopped, glancing down at her arms, where the tiger was growling silently up at her. She took a deep breath, calming herself, trying to think of something else. The tiger liked to prowl her left arm, although it had been originally tattooed on her right. It always seemed to have its mouth open when someone was communicating, although that didn't happen with the others.

It had been Harry's voice.

“Harry? Is something wrong?” he hadn't sounded particularly anxious, although they were mutually worried about the problem with Malfoy. Could Harry catch up in time? Was he there already?

“Malfoy is still going. Mad-Eye should be on his way back up there to warn everyone. Where are you?”

She looked up, then back down. “I'm almost at the tunnel. Neville and Ron didn't take much to manage.” She considered telling him about Neville trying to stun her, but decided neither of them needed any distractions right now. She could feel that they were heading into the biggest fight she had ever been in.

“Harry, I can hear someone down the tunnel. Will you be all right? I'll be right there.”

He chuckled, though nervously. “See you in a minute, I hope.”

She closed the connection. Moments later, Mad-Eye Moody stumbled out of the hole in the One-eyed witch, panting. He looked up at Ginny wildly. “Someone down in the tunnel,” he said gruffly. “Looked like Potter, but Potter is stationed at the Astronomy Tower during emergencies...” he grunted and nearly fell, and she noticed that he was heavily favoring his left leg.

“James Potter?” she asked carefully.

“Looked younger, though,” said Moody. “If I hadn’t been positive that Harry was up with his father...”

“How?” asked Ginny quickly.

“Patronus,” he muttered, his breathing becoming more labored. “Just got one from James. But I swear it was Potter.” He braced himself against the wall.

Ginny held back a gasp. The light was dim down in the tunnel. Harry’s glamour charms must have come off somehow. And he didn’t know. That meant they were still off.

“Tell me what happened, Alastor,” she said, guiding him over to a nearby bench, although her mind was screaming at her that she didn’t have time for this. But this man could ruin everything. She needed to know what he had seen. And he was hurt, although she couldn’t visibly see it.

“I could tell he had a glamour charm on,” Moody began, and then stopped. His wand came up suddenly, pointing between her eyes. “You’re his wife. Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

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Harry felt the connection to Ginny close as she saw Mad-Eye. He continued running, mercifully glad of the exercises he and Ron had been doing that enabled him to run for this long. This passage was longer than he remembered. Come to think of it, he hadn’t been down it in so long that he had no idea how long it would take for the packed earthen walls to give way to the trapdoor in Honeydukes. How long had it been? Four years?

He stopped suddenly, seeing a beam of light from the trapdoor and hearing voices.

“Moody is out,” came Malfoy’s voice. Beneath the regular arrogant tone Draco Malfoy usually displayed, Harry could hear something in it...just a small edge of fear. What was Malfoy afraid of?

“Dead?” the voice was unfamiliar, low and gravelly.

“N-no. Stunned.” Harry frowned at the stutter in Malfoy’s voice. Then, “he tried to get me, but—”

Thump. “You should have killed him, boy,” the gravelly voice said angrily. “Never leave a man behind to make others aware of your presence.”

“Yes, sir.” Malfoy’s voice was slurred now. Harry wondered what had caused that noise, then stopped wondering and quickly cast a disillusionment charm on himself and drew the sword as he heard footsteps getting closer to the trapdoor. What had happened to the owner of Honeydukes? Had the Death Eaters launched an all-out attack on Hogsmeade, or had all the residents gotten out in time? They seemed very well-versed for these situations.

He could hear a large number of footsteps clomping over his head. He braced himself. How many people were on their way down the trapdoor? From the footsteps and muttered voices, it sounded like a few hundred.

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Ginny raised her hands and backed away slowly. Her heart pounded as Moody’s electric blue eye focused on her. It was nearly impossible to discern any emotion from his brutally scarred face, but Ginny could still see the suspicion and mistrust.

“We aren’t supporters of Voldemort,” she said carefully, noting his flinch at the name. “We’re here to help. We are helping the Order.”

“Who are you?” growled Moody. “Was that really James Potter down there? Don’t toy with me, girl.”

“All right,” she said, feeling out of options. She dropped her hands, reaching for her wand so she could remove her own glamour spells. “My real name is Ginny Weasley.”

She stopped as his scarred face contorted in confusion, then disgust and rage. He muttered something and a jet of purple light shot out of his wand and sped toward her, and then she knew no more.

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The stone foundations of the castle shook. Ron glanced up in shock. “What’s going on?”

“They’ve done this before, my boy,” said Slughorn loudly, not turning around. “Just a basic earthquake spell to try to create panic among the defenders. It worked the first time, but not now. The castle is well-protected against such things.”

Ron wasn’t reassured, but he continued watching the dark passageway. He had been amazed when Slughorn had first removed the illusion of a wall to reveal a passage that he was sure not even Fred and George knew about. The passage led out to a spot in the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest, and the wards were weak and slightly cracked there. Slughorn had also performed a spell enabling them to see the wards, and Ron, Hermione and Horace, as he had requested they call him, were using a combined spell to strengthen and hide the flaw.

Dumbledore had meant to fix the ward before he had died, but the strength to do so had died with him. McGonagall knew how, but had not been able to call together a circle of strong enough witches and wizards to repair the wards.

“Horace, have any Death Eaters ever gotten through here before?” asked Hermione curiously.

“We think they don’t know about it,” said Slughorn. “No point in leaving it open though, eh?”

Ron nodded wordlessly, and then stopped.

“Do you hear something?”

“It’s in your mind, boy,” said Slughorn jovially. “No one ever comes this way. That’s why they have me here, I’m worthless at dueling...”

“Hush,” said Hermione harshly. “I heard it too.”

The three fell silent. After a moment, the noise came again: the distinct sound of footsteps.

“I think someone has found the tunnel, Horace,” said Ron in a hushed voice.

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Harry gave the Death Eaters no time to think. As soon as the first appeared down the tunnel, he cast the destroying curse directly at his chest. The man fell with a scream.

Two more Death Eaters followed immediately. One Harry killed by casting the cutting curse across his throat; the other fell in surprise when his comrade gave a gurgling shout and went limp. Harry plunged the sword into his chest, trying not to think about the disgusting feeling of the metal passing effortlessly through flesh, muscle and bone.

After the first three died the efforts to get down the ladder stopped quickly. Harry tried to get his breath back as quietly as possible, knowing that the next wave would be more difficult. He had been lucky to take the first three completely by surprise.

“Crucio!” he heard from above, and someone screaming. It sounded like Malfoy.

“This is your fault, boy! Moody must have gotten word to someone!”

“Avada Kedavra!” Harry brought the sword up by instinct as the green light flashed toward him. He turned the sword sharply down, then back up, blocking the two other killing curses that followed and cursing himself for being stupid enough to ignore his surroundings while listening to what was going on above him.

The three curses must have been shot blindly; he was still invisible. Whoever was down here was invisible as well, and had just seen three killing curses shoot off into thin air and then vanish. Harry silently backed against the wall.

“Must be dead,” muttered one man. “Let’s go.” It was the gravelly voice he had heard above. Two men swam into visibility, and Harry nearly rolled his eyes at the stupidity of becoming visible before finding a body.

“Reducto!” he shouted, pointing his wand at one man and at the same time running forward and running the other man through with the sword.

“Finite incantatem!” came a shout from the corner, and Harry felt himself shimmer into visibility. So one of the men had had the sense to remain visible.

Three more Death Eaters dropped into the passageways, all three simultaneously sending Killing Curses at Harry. He ducked, throwing the sword in front of his face to block one of the curses while the others sailed over his head.

The Death Eaters began throwing curses in earnest, and it was all Harry could do to block and occasionally throw back spells. He fervently hoped that Ginny would stay away from this mess.

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Ron frowned down the tunnel. Whoever was coming wasn't being quiet about it. He exchanged confused glances with Hermione. A loud voice echoed down the passage.

"Where are we now? I thought you said we were just going to hide in the cave in the forest, but this is a tunnel..."

Ron's jaw dropped. He knew that voice. He had heard it pleading for its life in his third year at Hogwarts. The rat, the bloody rat, which had spent ten years masquerading as a pet, who had betrayed Harry and his parents, betrayed Sirius, and Remus...

"Pettigrew," he mouthed at Hermione, who nodded to show she had understood. Ron advanced with his wand held out in front of him. A light turned the corner. Pettigrew was only twenty feet away, and then...

"What's this?"

"What?" muttered another voice, this one unfamiliar.

"I can't walk any further. Like a wall, but I can't—" the voice cut off suddenly as Pettigrew saw Ron.

He began sprinting. He had to catch the rat. He didn't know if the rat's crimes were the same or worse in this world. It didn't matter.

"Stupefy! Stupefy!" he sent two stunners, which bounced several times off the stone walls of the tunnel before missing both Death Eaters. Ron continued to run, ignoring Hermione's shouting.

He was almost there. He jumped at Pettigrew, feeling a slight resistance as he passed through the wards, and then landed on...

Did not land on Pettigrew. He tried to grab hold of the rat's tail as it ran squeaking away from him, but missed. At the same time, the other Death Eater caught him in the nose with his huge fist, and Ron vaguely recognized him as being Vincent Crabbe's father.

“Stupefy!” Crabbe senior suddenly slumped over as Hermione rose behind him. Ron blinked at her, slightly disoriented. “How did you get here so bloody fast?”

She glared at him. “I thought about it, Ron! What were you thinking, just running wildly at them? The wards stop people with harmful intentions, but they don’t stop spells!” she bent down and placed her wand on his nose, which was bleeding. “Episky.”

“Bloody hell,” muttered Ron. Hermione stood up and stalked away from him back down the tunnel. He followed at a slower pace, listening to her speak to Slughorn.

“I’m going to go warn McGonagall to get some extra people down here. Pettigrew is bound to go back and report this tunnel. Take care of him,” she jerked her head at Ron, “I’ll be back as quickly as I can.”

Slughorn looked at Ron. “You picked a difficult one, my boy.”

Ron sighed. “I know.” he glanced down the tunnel. “I’m going to take a look a little further along here, all right?”

“Are you sure you ought to do that?” asked Slughorn shrewdly, eyeing him.

“I’ll be back in about ten minutes,” said Ron, not answering the question. He walked quickly down the tunnel, then turned the corner and broke into a run. He had to find Pettigrew.

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Ginny woke up in the dark. She was cold. Why was she cold?

It took her a moment to realize that the coldness was caused by the fact that she was sitting in a puddle of water. Gingerly, she stood up, and bumped her head immediately on the ceiling.

A short room then. She cautiously reached out her arms and touched the walls on both sides. A very small room...



What had happened? Moody had hit her with a spell. She could feel pain in her chest where it had hit, and she wasn't breathing entirely properly. She sat down, then realized she was sitting down on something and felt around it. It was a bucket. Beside it was a mop.

She was in one of the castle's many storage closets for cleaning supplies, then. She touched the door on one side of her. It was locked. She reached down.

Her wand was gone.

So Moody hadn't believed her. In hindsight, she shouldn't have started by telling him who she really was. She should have gone with the first story she told Professor McGonagall. She supposed that his Auror instincts had told him to ignore her story and get rid of her so he could join the battle. Where had he gone? Was he off helping Harry? Was he telling McGonagall about them, and learning that McGonagall knew?

She groaned in frustration. There was a battle going on out there, and she was stuck in a broom closet! What could she do?

She poked the tattoo. "Harry Potter." No answer. She knew that Harry could occasionally communicate through the tattoo without using his wand. She had seen him do it, although he seemed unaware of it.

She tried again. "Hermione Granger. Ronald Weasley." Nothing.

She screamed in frustration and pounded on the door. No one would hear her. The students were all in their dormitories. The teachers were stationed at fighting positions. Her friends and brother couldn't hear her.

She slid down the wall, a tear running down her face.

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“Minerva!” shouted Hermione up the staircase, running across the main hall. McGonagall appeared at the top of the staircase.

“What is it?”

“Death Eaters in the dungeon tunnel,” Hermione shouted. Running up the stairs, she got the story out quickly.

“So Pettigrew got away, but we’re sure he’ll be coming back with reinforcements,” she finished.

“Your husband just went after the rat?” asked McGonagall shrewdly, waving over a large man in the uniform of an auror. “Are you sure he is rational in this issue? Do you have personal history with Mr. Pettigrew?”

Hermione opened her mouth, but McGonagall turned away and began explaining the situation to the man, who nodded and strode away.

“So the aurors are here?” asked Hermione, frowning. “I thought we were just waiting on them so that they could drive the Death Eaters away.”

“A detachment are in Hogsmeade looking for the Death Eaters,” said McGonagall. “They are in the village somewhere, though it is unsure where.”

“Honeydukes,” breathed Hermione. “Harry went to hold them off in the tunnel. I had forgotten.”

“What tunnel?” asked McGonagall sharply.

“Behind the statue of the One-eyed witch on the third floor,” said Hermione, confused. “You didn’t know...” McGonagall was already waving wildly to the big Auror again.

“Show them,” she ordered Hermione, who nodded and led ten Aurors quickly away.

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The tunnel ended at the edge of the forbidden forest. Ron surfaced quickly and spotted Pettigrew almost immediately. He had changed back to human form and was moving away. Ron followed quietly, disillusioning himself as he went.

Pettigrew stopped suddenly, looking around. Ron held still, and eventually the man continued on. Ron pulled out his wand and pointed it at Pettigrew, thinking with all his might, Levicorpus!

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Harry backed off down the tunnel, panting wildly. He was hurting all over, it felt like. The cuts and bruises on his body were mounting; his energy was fading, and he had taken to only blocking the lethal curses with the sword in order to save energy. He could tell that casting the Killing Curse took a lot of energy as well; it was coming at him less and less.

He was sure he had managed to kill or injure nearly fifteen Death Eaters, but they continued to come.

He heard shouting on the stairs, then several new voices casting spells. Death Eaters were falling, and not because of him; he had given up casting and spells but shield spells a while before, and was using the sword as his sole offensive weapon.

“There’s someone down here!” came a familiar voice, and Harry sagged in relief at the deep, reassuring timbre of Kingsley Shacklebolt. “Who is that? Are you all right?”

Harry managed to shout something incomprehensible. There were still three living Death Eaters who were doing their best to destroy him.

The large black man dropped into the tunnel. "Bloody hell," he muttered, staring around at the carnage in the tunnel. Then he shook himself and Stunned one of the Death Eaters immediately, then hit the second one with a cutting curse just as Harry ran him through with the sword at the same time. The body slid limply onto Harry as the stunner hit it, and he keeled over backwards.

"Avada Kedavra!" came the last shout of the third Death Eater. Harry slid directly into the path of the green jet of light, and then everything went black.

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A/N: Think what you like about that.

This chapter was harder to write, I'm not sure why. Let me know what you think. The reviews for last chapter were fantastic. Thanks to everyone who did review. If you didn't, I wish you would, but I suppose it's your choice. Thanks.

Ginny glared around at the tiny broom closet. There were things happening out there. Something important. For all she knew, when she got out the place would be overrun and controlled by Death Eaters.

She took several long, deep breaths. She had to get herself under control if she was to get out of this place. No point in screaming for help; anyone could come, including Death Eaters. Were they inside the school? If they were, and the school was overrun, would they find her, or would she be stuck in here forever? What if Moody died?

She backtracked. Why had Moody had such an extreme reaction to her name? What was so important about Ginny Weasley?

The wood of the door looked at her mockingly. Things were going wrong out there. She could practically feel it. Harry was fighting, somewhere out there. Ron and Hermione likely were as well.

She set her eyes on the wall. She needed to be out of here. She needed to retrieve a wand and help Harry, Ron and Hermione.

The world around her silenced, the muffled shouts and screams from beyond the door fading into nothingness. Her mind shaped itself around the door. She could feel...power, something like what she felt when casting a spell, but wilder, less tame...

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"You bloody little rat!" Ron shouted, striding toward the immobile Pettigrew. "Think you can get away with anything!" Pettigrew opened his mouth, but Ron quickly Silenced him and removed his wand, snapping it in two places. Pettigrew's cheek twitched and he opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

"Twelve years," Ron muttered, pacing. He couldn't think. What should he do? "Pretending to be our pet, pretending to be my friend..." he glanced around, noting that they were in an open area, naked to ambush. Harry would love a chance at this rat. Yes, that was what he would do. Harry had been far more hurt by the rat than

Ron had. "I'm taking you to someone who would probably like to hurt you a lot. Petrificus Totalus!" Ron began carefully floating the rat toward the tunnel and into it.

"Stupefy!"

Ron turned around quickly, dropping the petrified Pettigrew on the ground in his effort to duck. Ron glanced back. The man had tried his Animagus transformation, and was now a stiff rat lying on the ground. He glanced back around at the forest.

There were three black-cloaked figures advancing on him.

"Expelliarmus! Stupefy! Petrificus Totalus!" he hit one of the men with his Stunner, but the other two continued to advance, one stopping to awaken their stunned comrade while the other unleashed a volley of curses at Ron, starting with the Killing curse, which he barely dodged. He knew now that he would need something somewhat more permanent than a stunning spell to keep them down.

"Reducto! Reducto, Reducto, Diffindo!"

His third Reductor curse got through quickly to the middle death eater, who keeled over. Ron noticed at once that one of the Death Eaters was trying to move around him and get to Pettigrew.

"Wingardium Leviosa," he snarled, pointing his wand at a large rock. At the same time, he ducked away from a Killing Curse only to walk into a mysterious curse that opened huge gashes in his right arm. He quickly let the rock go from the shock and pain. It crashed over the head of the second Death Eater, leaving Ron facing the third alone.

"Crucio!" the man shouted. Ron threw up a shield automatically but the curse raced straight through, filling him with pain as he had never felt it before. He screamed.

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Hermione led the aurors quickly through the tunnel. It had taken mere minutes to get them to the statue of the one-eyed witch and down the tunnel, but she was still struck with the thought that they were too late.

She could hear the sounds of combat from here, what she recognized as Harry's voice. A clamor of other voices, most shouting unforgivables, rose above Harry's at times. She could hear screams of pain as well.

"This leads to Honeydukes, you said?" asked the big man who was jogging along beside her, keeping pace easily. He appeared to be the leader.

"Yes," panted Hermione. They had run all the way there and her lungs were about to give out.

"Shacklebolt should be there in a moment," said one of the other aurors, and the man beside her agreed. "Dawlish only sent out his detachment twenty minutes ago."

Several new voices joined the fight ahead, then, after several more spells were cast, all went silent.

"Sounds like something big," commented one of the aurors behind her. Hermione nodded and quickened her stride.

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The door exploded in a mass of splinters and nails. Ginny strode out of the wreckage, completely calm. She didn't want to stop and wonder what had just happened. If she wondered, she wouldn't be able to do it again, and she had the feeling in her now.

She needed a wand. No, she needed to find Harry. She began running down to the one-eyed witch.

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Ron raised his wand. “Stupefy!” the word was screamed through waves of resounding pain. The man, caught completely unawares, was Stunned immediately.

Ron put his hands on his knees and panted for a moment, the echo of the Cruciatus curse still within him, twanging at his nerves. He had never suffered the curse before, had never even known what it was supposed to feel like. Harry had never spoken about it. Now Ron knew why.

He stood up and checked the two Death Eaters who had been taken out earlier in the fight. The one who had been Reductoed was dead. The one who had been hit with the rock was breathing shallowly and had blood all over his scalp. Ron carefully levitated the three living Death Eaters and Wormtail and continued down the passageway, cradling his bleeding right arm.

They reached the end to find Slughorn still waiting.

“Thanks for the help, Horace,” growled Ron, levitating the Death Eaters past him. Slughorn’s eyes widened.

“Is that—why, you caught him! I thought you were just going up the tunnel a ways, Henry.” His eyes glinted, but Ron ignored him, continuing to walk with the small, frightened-looking man floating beside him. The adrenaline was starting to wear off now. His arm was throbbing and he felt slightly dizzy. And he would be speaking to McGonagall about Slughorn’s lack of help...there was so much he needed to do. Where was Harry? Where was Hermione? Where was Ginny?

“Henry, stop.” A hand touched his arm. The world teetered and wobbled as Ron tried to make sense of who was touching him. “You’ve lost a lot of blood. Here, sit down, I’ll heal this best I can and then get some blood-replenishing potions—and get someone to help with these captives...” the words faded out as Ron collapsed.

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The battle came into view around the corner, illuminated by the murky light of three Auror wands.

“Shacklebolt,” called one of the Aurors behind Hermione. “What happened?”

“We just got here, Proudfoot,” responded Kingsley. “This fellow was just tearing up Death Eaters. There must be twenty here. A couple of them are ones we’ve been looking for for a while.”

Hermione stared at Harry. He was lying on the ground and he wasn’t moving. What had he been hit with? How long would he be in the hospital wing this time?

Kingsley was still talking. “We could use a man like him on the squads. Or maybe teaching. But we got here too late.”

Hermione looked up. “What? What do you mean, too late?” Her voice came out a nervous squawk.

Kingsley glanced over at Proudfoot, who muttered, “They...work together. Grew up together, I think.”

Kingsley stepped forward. “He was hit with the killing curse, Ma’am. I’m sorry.”

The world teetered and whirled, and someone yelled, “Catch her!” as the world went black.

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Ginny turned the corner in the passage to Honeydukes into a scene of chaos. It looked like there were twenty bodies on the ground, maimed in various ways. It looked like Harry’s work. Aurors swarmed over the bodies, apparently looking for identification.

Hermione was lying on the ground on what looked to be a large conjured pillow. Beside her...

“What...” she rushed forward but stopped a foot away, staring at Harry. There were cuts and bruises all over him. One of his arms appeared to be broken and he was a ghastly shade of white. But his eyes were closed and it looked, in a way, like he was sleeping...

One of the Aurors strode over. “And who are you?” he was polite, but all business. He wanted to know if she had a right to be there.

“That’s my...husband,” she said, pointing at Harry. “What happened to him?”

The Auror stared at her in a kind of mute horror, then sighed. “Kingsley!” he shouted. A feeling of dread solidified in Ginny’s stomach. What was going on here?

She listened in horror to Kingsley’s tale, and then turned to look at Harry. She held off the sadness, the way she had held off confusion on how she had destroyed the door. She knelt down beside him and looked into his face. His eyes were closed. His expression was one of anger, the expression she knew he must have been wearing as he fought overwhelming odds.

“Ginny?” Hermione had woken up, and she was wearing the same expression that Ginny knew she must have on.

Ginny collapsed on the other girl, allowing the sadness and confusion to break free.

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Somehow they made their way up to the hospital wing. The battle was over. It seemed to Ginny that the whole thing had revolved around them four.

Ron was already at the Hospital wing, along with about thirty injured Aurors. Madam Pomfrey was fussing over Ron. Hermione climbed onto his bed and asked him tremulously what had happened.

Ginny watched their interaction as if from afar. Something was wrong. She could feel it. She had felt grief when she had been told he was dead, but not enough. Something in her mind had subconsciously countered it.

Something was wrong.

Harry couldn't be dead. He couldn't.

Hermione beckoned her over, and Ginny went, as if in a dream. Ron was staring at her, ashen.

"It's not true," he whispered, sounding broken. "Tell me it isn't true."

She abided by his wishes. "You're right. It's not true."

She woke at midnight.

They had assured her that she was just grieving in a different way than her. They had been careful, but they were sure she was wrong. Ron had thrown his water pitcher across the room with such force that it had shattered, despite the Unbreakable charm. They had fallen into a troubled sleep, Ron and Hermione in the same bed, Ginny alone.

She knew that they would be grieving in a different way, were he really dead.

A thought rose unbidden in her mind. If it weren't for the Prophecy, we wouldn't be here. We would be living normal lives. It wouldn't be like this...

The Prophecy.

She understood.

She went straight to McGonagall's office, knocking on the gargoyle. "Minerva, I need to come in. It's important."

No response. Of course not. It was midnight. She was about to turn away when the gargoyle opened for her, revealing the spiral staircase. She ran up it two stairs at a time, barging straight through to the office.

“Mrs. Anderson,” said McGonagall carefully. “To what do I owe this late-night visit?”

The Headmistress was fully dressed, Ginny noticed. In fact, she wasn’t alone in the office.

“You!” shouted Moody.

Ginny glared at him, but as she still hadn’t retrieved her wand, she did nothing.

“Would you care to explain what this is about, Alastor?” asked McGonagall coldly. The others around the table, including Amelia Bones and an Auror Ginny vaguely recognized as Dawlish, looked askance at Moody.

“I caught this one near the passage, after I saw Potter there,” he said, eyeing her. “Said she was Ginny Weasley.”

“You hit me with a nasty spell and locked me in a broom closet,” retorted Ginny. “All I did was tell you who I was. What—” she stopped. McGonagall was shaking her head.

“I apologize for this misunderstanding,” she said, sighing. “Miss Anderson, a word, please? And you as well, Alastor.” She brought them over to a corner of the office and Silenced the area around them.

“Ginny, you haven’t lived long enough in this world to understand it,” she said, glaring at Moody to keep him silent. “It has been the common practice of Death Eaters in the past few years to pretend to be the dead loved ones of someone who misses them desperately. It’s a type of psychological torture, if you will. An Auror has no trouble fighting against a Death Eater, but their own mother? Brother? Daughter? We have had several Ginny Weasley attempts in the last few years. Alastor was probably thinking fast, and didn’t stop to think

about just why you would claim you were Ginny Weasley to him, someone who has no emotional attachment. People make quick decisions during battle. They have to.”

Ginny frowned. “You didn’t question me when I told you who I was. Or Harry.”

“I hit you with a wordless Truth Spell the moment you walked through my door.” Ginny prepared to look indignant, but McGonagall cut her off. “War calls for different measures, Ginny.”

She turned to Moody. “Your questions now, Alastor. And for me to answer them, I require a Wizard’s oath, or else I will Obliviate you.”

Moody grunted. “I so swear not to tell another soul what I will hear in the next five minutes.” He glowed for a moment. Ginny raised an eyebrow. Most Oaths were done with much more ceremony than that, but she supposed Mad-Eye Moody didn’t care about ceremony.

“All right,” said McGonagall, looking a bit exasperated. “What do you know about alternate universes, Alastor?”

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In the dark, a pair of green eyes snapped open.

He moved his hands carefully to the side. His entire body ached.

He met resistance barely two inches away. He tried to sit up, and banged his head on a solid surface. He slid upwards on the surface he was lying on, and banged his head again.

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“Professor,” Ginny asked as soon as she had finished explaining the situation to Moody, “Where is Harry?”

McGonagall’s face softened. “You don’t have to know that, Ginny. The first step to accepting is to—”

“Where is he?”

“The dead are put into coffins immediately,” said Moody, staring at her as if still trying to come to terms with what she was.

“Where?” she was horrified.

“They haven’t been transported yet,” said McGonagall carefully. “They should be in the dungeons.”

“Take me there.”

“Why?”

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He was cold. What was he wearing? He squinted down. It was white. It wrapped him tightly.

He slid down, and met resistance. A splinter poked at the cuts on his feet.

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“Professor Trelawney made a Prophecy before Harry was born,” explained Ginny leading McGonagall and Moody down to the dungeons. It talked about him and the dark lord. It said—”

“Either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives,” chorused McGonagall and Moody. Ginny stared at them.

“Common knowledge in the Order of the Phoenix,” said McGonagall. “It refers to Neville Longbottom.”

“Not in my world,” Ginny said, shaking her head. “In my world it’s Harry. It means he’s the only one who can kill Voldemort. But also,”

they had reached the dungeons. Moody took over the lead, showing her which dungeon the coffins were kept in.

“Also, it means that Voldemort is the only one who can kill Harry.”

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Hermione woke up.

Something was wrong.

She turned her head to the left, not wanting to move any of the rest of her body. She was lying on top of Ron, having fallen asleep there while he held her.

Ginny was gone.

“Ron!”

He mumbled something incoherent.

“Ron, wake up, right now!”

He rolled over, knocking her off the bed. She stood up, retrieving her wand from the bedside table.

“Aguamenti!”

He shot up, spitting out water and looking around for whoever had hit him. Hermione put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

“Ginny is missing.”

His reaction was immediate, despite the fact that he had just woken up. He shot out of bed and grabbed his wand. “Do you know why?”

“I don’t think it’s urgent.” She put her wand on the small owl flying around her arm, mentally chastising herself for forgetting about it.

“Ginny Weasley. Ginny?”

“Hermione?” Ginny’s voice sounded breathy to Hermione’s ears.

“What’s going on? Where are you?”

“I’m in the dungeons, Hermione. I figured it out. Harry isn’t dead. Come down, both of you.” She closed the connection. Hermione frowned and tried to reopen it, but Ginny didn’t respond.

She glanced at Ron, who shrugged, looking as though he was trying to stop himself from being hopeful.

“Do you think...” he asked, not completing the sentence. He didn’t need to. Hermione knew what he would have asked.

“Let’s get down there and find out.”

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The coffins were labeled, but it wasn’t hard to find Harry’s. There were only five dead, four Aurors and Harry.

“Is this regular?” asked Ginny curiously. “Just throwing them in coffins immediately?”

“War regulations,” muttered Moody. “Keeps the enemy from getting at the corpse. Polyjuice potion, reanimation spells...they need parts of the person to work. Some families have enough money to keep the bodies out for long enough for them to see, and say goodbye, but most don’t.”

Ginny’s heart ached at the ruthlessness of it.

She stopped in front of the coffin, looking down on it, then threw open the lid.

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Light flooded in. He blinked.

“Why...” he stopped, looking at Ginny, then smiled.

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They met Ron and Hermione halfway back to the hospital wing. They had conjured a stretcher for Harry, despite his protests. McGonagall and Moody had apologized.

Ron rushed forward, his face gray, to look at Harry. Once he was confirmed alive, Ron backed away.

“Good to have you back, mate.”

Hermione’s mouth formed a question, but Ginny shook her head.

When they got to the hospital wing, Ron and Hermione got back into their vacant bed, and Ginny invited Harry into hers.

What had the feeling been, that something was wrong? Had she really known, or had she just been missing the warmth beside her in bed, seeing Ron and Hermione?

How had she exploded the door?

She looked at Harry, who was already asleep, his arm in a sling and his cuts patched up, waiting for Madam Pomfrey to wake up. Questions could be left for tomorrow.

She drifted slowly off to sleep.

Harry woke feeling bruised all over.

He tried first to lift his head, but the effort was too much. His head felt nastily heavy, like his neck couldn't support it. He dared not sit up. His head would snap off his neck.

He settled for a loud groan.

Madam Pomfrey, who was across the hospital wing attending to a student who appeared to have grown a horn out of her forehead, looked over at him and called, "Be there in a moment, Mr. Evans."

He turned his head slightly to the side into the mass of red hair that belonged to Ginny. She was still asleep, her mouth open slightly. Ron and Hermione lay in the bed beside them. Harry noticed both beds had been extended and both couples had been moved slightly apart. He grinned slightly. "Married" or not, madam Pomfrey would brook no nonsense in her infirmary.

"All right, let's take a look at you," the matron said briskly, bustling over. She pulled out her wand and performed a quick spell.

"It's bizarre," she muttered. "I've never seen anyone whose magical reserves have been so depleted. It's as if you used every drop of magic left in you to do whatever it was you did. They didn't tell me." She fixed Harry with a beady eye. "Would you like to elaborate?"

Harry had bigger worries. "What do you mean, my magical reserves have been depleted?" was he a squib now?

The matron tsked. "Everyone depletes their reserves at some point. It happens when you overwork yourself, perform too much magic. Normally when you perform huge workings, setting wards and such. Albus had a bit of trouble with it when he reset the Hogwarts wards. But even he didn't lose as much as you." She frowned at the look of panic on his face. "Don't worry, Mr. Evans, the magic will be back within you in four days." Seeing he still didn't understand, she sighed.

“Look at the water pitcher on your side table.” Harry looked. It was full to the brim.

“The water is your magic. Everyone has a certain amount. Performing everyday spells, Scourgify and Wingardium Leviosa and such, barely scratches the surface.” She picked up the pitcher. “For larger things, like Apparation, Animagus transformations or conjuring or vanishing large or living objects, you may use up some of your reserves.” She poured a few drops of water out of the pitcher. Harry nodded.

“You,” she waved the water pitcher at him, “you have done this.” She turned the pitcher upside down, allowing all the water to spill out. “You have a naturally fast-replenishing supply of magic.” Harry glanced at the pitcher, which was automatically filling itself up again.

“So I’ll be back to normal in four days?” he asked hopefully.

“That’s an estimate,” said Madam Pomfrey, checking his broken and newly healed arm. “Even at his largest working, Albus Dumbledore himself never poured more than half the water out of his pitcher, so to speak. I’d love to know just what you did. I’m surprised none of us felt the magical backlash of something that had to be huge.”

“I don’t know what I did,” muttered Harry, wanting to go back to sleep and avoid all these questions. He glanced around the hospital wing, looking for a distraction. “Er...where did all the aurors go who were here last night?”

“They were taken back to their own headquarters,” said the matron. “The Aurors never let their employees have more than the night off, no matter if they’re nearly dead.” The disapproval was obvious in her tone. “Well, I suppose they’re short-staffed enough there as it is.”

Harry frowned, but chose not to comment.

When he woke up the second time, Ginny, Ron and Hermione were all up and chatting quietly. Ron was the first to glance over and see his eyes open.

“Harry!”

It didn't hurt so much to raise his head anymore. He wasn't as heavy.

The three clustered around him, smiling and all talking at once. Harry let the talk wash over him, not really listening. Hermione had found him and thought he was dead, and Ginny had come and proven he wasn't after somehow getting out of a locked closet, and Ron had been in a fight but was all right now...

The three stopped all on top of each other and Hermione looked suspiciously at Ginny. “Wait. He locked you in a closet and you...blew up the door?”

Ginny frowned, looking down. “It just happened. I don't really know why. I put my hands on the door and felt something.” She wasn't making eye contact with anyone, the way Harry knew she acted when she was either thinking hard or ashamed of something. He knew it couldn't possibly be the latter.

“Could you do it again, do you think?” he asked curiously. Wandless magic. It was something he barely knew anything about, another shortcoming of growing up a muggle. Was it common? Could many wizards do it, or was it as rare as parseltongue?

Ginny looked up, meeting his eyes finally. “I could. I know I could.”

“Do something then,” said Hermione eagerly. Harry exchanged grins with Ron. The ever-curious and studious Hermione was back, showing through the war-hardened woman that had appeared in the last few days.

Ginny looked unsure. “I can do it, I'm just not sure how well...I mean, I just wanted to open the door, and it exploded.” She looked at the water pitcher on the side of the table and narrowed her eyes.

“Ginny, maybe you shouldn't—” Harry began, but it was too late. The water pitcher shot into the air, rocketed over Harry's bed and

smashed into the opposite wall, falling to the ground unbroken thanks to the renewed unbreakable charms.

Silence fell over the four. Harry glanced towards Madam Pomfrey's office, but it appeared that the matron was out of the room.

"What did you try to do?" Hermione asked into the hushed silence, clearly trying not to look shocked but failing.

"Levitate it," said Ginny quietly. "Just up, not all around. I don't have any idea how to control it."

"It came out of nowhere, too," said Ron. Harry glanced at him. He had been silent during the display.

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione intently.

"Well, most magical kids who have the wandless ability show it when they're young," said Ron. "You know, summoning their toys when they want them or Healing their little bruises or something."

"How common is it?" asked Hermione just ahead of Harry.

"It normally runs in families," said Ginny, and Ron nodded. "I don't think we've had anyone who can do strong wandless magic in our family. I think maybe the Parkinsons can do it, or the Changs."

"Hang on," said Harry. "I did wandless magic when I was little. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia always complained about it. Like when I Vanished the glass at the zoo—" he stopped. Ron and Ginny were shaking their heads. Hermione looked contemplative.

"Anyone can do accidental magic," said Ron dismissively. "We all did it when we were little. Kids who grow up to have the wandless ability use it on purpose. They summon their toys, or heal their bruises when they're hurt."

"It's all intentional?" asked Hermione. Ron nodded.

“And it doesn’t run in your family,” Harry clarified. Both Weasleys nodded again.

“Unless Mum or Dad was keeping secrets from us,” Ron said.

Silence fell again for a moment, and then Hermione said, “We need to get back.”

“Where?” asked Harry absentmindedly, his mind full of exploding doors.

“Back home. For real. To our own world. Haven’t you been wondering what’s been happening?”

Harry sighed quietly. He had been avoiding it, but the thoughts came rushing back. Had Headquarters been found? Was the Order all right? Was Hogwarts all right? Had anything happened to the Weasleys? To anyone?

He looked up. Ron’s face was gray, and Harry knew that he had been pushing away all the same thoughts.

“Can we do it, though?” said Ginny, sitting down on Harry’s bed. “There are Horcruxes here, too, you know. They need help.”

“And we can’t bring anything back through the portal,” added Ron. “We need to learn how to destroy them here.”

“We’ll be doing them a favor by leaving them the book and the identities of the Horcruxes,” said Hermione. “I looked through that book. It’s basically a history book. The spell is simple, it just requires a lot of power and a potion to be drunk beforehand. And the potion is simple, too.” She turned away and glared out the window. “It was a waste to come here for so long. It’s so easy, I could have come up with it myself.”

“Have you...” Harry stopped. He wasn’t sure how he was going to complete the sentence.

“I’ve memorized the whole thing, if that’s what you were going to ask,” Hermione snapped, turning back. Harry was shocked to see tears glistening in her eyes. “We have to get back. I don’t know about you, Ron, Ginny, but I miss my family. We wasted months here for this stupid potion and spell, and our families could be dead. This isn’t our world. We don’t have an obligation to save it, but we do need to worry about our own!”

“She’s right,” said Ron, more quietly, and Harry was struck by the role reversal between the two of them. Normally it was Ron who yelled and Hermione who was calm and logical. “Things are stretched here, but they’re just as bad or worse in our own.”

“That’s not true,” said Ginny. “They’ve lost so many people here. This place is in a state of constant war. Hundreds of people we know are dead. I’m dead. If we can help, why shouldn’t we? Harry, you know that Neville has no chance against Voldemort. He needs teaching.”

Harry looked from Hermione to Ron to Ginny, and sighed. Ginny was right. Neville had no chance the way he was going. He needed a better teacher. But so did the Neville back home. Everyone needed help back in their own world. At least this world had their savior present, there to give them hope. What was the Order doing back home? Had Molly Weasley yet collapsed under the stress of two missing children? Where were the Grangers, prime targets for Death Eaters? Had Hogwarts resumed, and was everyone safe there?

Yes, Neville Longbottom needed a better teacher. But it did not have to be Harry Potter.

“We have to go home,” he said roughly, not making eye contact with Ginny. “We’ll leave the book and some tips on Neville for McGonagall. But we need to get back.” In his mind’s eye, a Hogwarts in flames collapsed on top of the remnants of the Order while Voldemort laughed.

“I’m going to go start packing,” said Hermione as Ginny opened her mouth. “Ginny, why don’t you come?”

The redhead got up and followed Hermione out of the room, not looking at Harry. Ron shrugged when the girls were gone. Harry lay back down on his pillow, but failed to fall asleep for a long time.

“So you choose to leave us now.” McGonagall said flatly. Harry, sitting up in bed once again, nodded miserably. There had been six teachers and about twelve students coming through the hospital wing after the official announcement had been made. They had cited “trouble at home” but McGonagall, as well as Moody, knew the truth. The other teachers had just been rather irritated or sympathetic, either asking why they couldn’t stay a little longer or wishing them the best of luck. The students were angry and confused, but most of them understood what “trouble at home” could mean after six years of ongoing war.

“You leave us without a defense teacher, without a way to destroy Voldemort—”

Harry pulled out the book, which Hermione had left enfolded in the bedsheets, and slammed it down on the bedside table. McGonagall stared at it.

“We can’t bring anything back,” Harry whispered. “We’ll know it when we get back, but you’ll have the book here. There, we’ve gotten you further along than you can possibly know.”

The book was solid black, with the words *The Soul* gleaming in blood-red letters.

“We have no defense teacher,” continued McGonagall, though Harry noticed that her eyes lingered on the book. “You are the best, sadly, that we have managed to find in years. You’ve seen the class. Neville Longbottom needs a teacher!”

“Then find him one!” Harry snapped, his patience used up. “Everyone in my world needs me to solve their bloody problems, now



everyone in your world needs me too! If you can't be bothered to make Neville better than he is, then you don't deserve to win this war! All your hope hinges on him, not me! Get your aurors, teach him advanced transfiguration or something. Just don't expect me to fix everything."

They glared at each other for a moment, and then McGonagall looked away, stood up, and marched out of the Hospital Wing. Harry lay back, feeling incredibly tired. He had tried to stand up several times, and found that his strength failed him. Madam Pomfrey was sure it was backlash from his depleted magic.

He looked up and saw that Ginny had come to stand in front of his bed. Harry opened his mouth, and then realized he had nothing to say. Had she heard?

"You have to care at least a little bit, don't you?" she said quietly, and Harry noticed a tear running down her face. "You can't have meant it when you said they don't deserve to win."

He didn't say anything, just looked at her. Hot shame was pouring into him over what he now realized he had said, but he wasn't about to admit it.

He glanced at the window, where the sun was just disappearing over the horizon. Ron and Hermione were busy packing and, from what he surmised from Ron, having an argument over Ron going off on his own when Hermione had specifically told him not to. Harry looked back at Ginny. At least Ron and Hermione shouted at each other. Ginny just stood there, as she was standing now, looking sad and talking like she was disappointed. He knew that if he had done something less, she would show that famous Weasley temper and shout him down, but now she was just standing there. He opened his mouth to apologize, to say he hadn't meant it, to say he would stay...then he clamped his mouth shut.

She turned quickly and left, leaving him in the dark with the guilt.

"I don't want to have to carry you down to the bloody portal," muttered Ron, sounding surly.

“Harry can get at least part of the way by herself,” Hermione relied crisply. “I can levitate him if you’re incapable, Ronald.”

They glared at each other. Harry sighed. “I’ll walk. It’ll be fine,” he said, though he knew it would be anything but. He could barely get out of the hospital wing, let alone go on a walk through the forest.

“No,” said Ron and Hermione in unison. Only Ginny remained silent, not looking at anyone.

All Harry wanted was for things to go back to how they were, for that battle to never have happened. It had changed everything, created a fight between Ron and Hermione, one between himself and Ginny...it had drained him of his magic and strength and done who knew what else to him...

He got out of the hospital wing and down one flight of stairs by himself, but then found himself dizzy and had to sit down. After two attempts at moving and being unable to, despite his protests, Hermione conjured a stretcher.

“Maybe we should wait until Harry is better,” suggested Ginny quietly. “There could be Death Eaters in the forest.”

“I’m going to disillusion us,” said Hermione.

“Why are you so eager to get back anyways?” Ron asked. “It’s normally you who keeps us back from doing something like this. Especially now that Harry is hurt.”

“I have a feeling...” murmured Hermione, and a look of terror flashed on and off her face. Harry looked quickly at Ron and Ginny, neither of whom appeared to have noticed.

At their next stop, at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, Ron and Ginny left to bid farewell to Hagrid and Harry moved closer to Hermione as best he could on the stretcher. There had been something to that look.

“You have a feeling?” he asked carefully.

She didn’t look at him. She stared out toward the forest, then began to speak.

“I had a vision,” she whispered. “Of some kind. I researched it, but couldn’t find anything.”

“What did you see?”

She looked at him and Harry was shocked at the terror he saw in her eyes.

“I was just coming back from the...tunnel,” she began. “When we thought you had—had—”

“Died,” Harry supplied.

“Yes. And suddenly I was somewhere else, I don’t know how.” She stopped.

“Where?” Harry asked carefully.

“My parents’ house,” she said quietly. “It was burning. And there were Death Eaters there...” she licked her lips. “It can’t happen. I knew when it would happen. There was one of those muggle 365 day calendars on the counter.”

Harry couldn’t ask the question. She answered without him asking.

“October twentieth.”

“That’s tomorrow,” Harry whispered, and she nodded. “Are you going to tell them?”

She looked around at Ron and Ginny, who were on their way back. “I don’t know. Not right now.”

Harry nodded, not pursuing the matter. The vision stuck in his head, though. Hermione's house burning down. He had never seen it, but he imagined it would be a nice house, clean and orderly, but also large and spacious.

And what about Hermione's parents? She wouldn't have had that horror in her eyes just over her house.

She couldn't have told him the whole of the vision. There had been something involving her parents as well.

"We have to get there," he said sharply. "Can we go any faster?"

"What's wrong with you, mate?" asked Ron, staring at Harry.

"Just...thinking about home," said Harry quietly, staring off at Hogwarts. Buildings in flames, Death Eaters striding through the wreckage and killing anything that moved...

"We have to get back. Anything could be happening."

The clearing was the same, in an eerie sort of way. When they had arrived in this world, Harry had been too concerned about Ginny being there to notice the creepy feeling that came with being somewhere that was the same, yet at the same time entirely different, from his home world.

The shape...an Octogram, Hermione had called it? It was obvious now that Harry really looked at it. Eight sides, and an odd absence of the regular leaves and forest scrub that normally covered the forest floor during October. The trees bent inwards menacingly, silhouetted against the gray sky. Their branches were naked of leaves, making them look like angry creatures reaching out to snatch up the humans. Harry glanced at the sky. He could only barely tell where the sun was, it's brightness dulled by the thick gray clouds that obscured the sky. It looked like it was going to rain.

"Raining when we got here, raining when we leave," muttered Ron, carefully moving his wand to lay down Harry's stretcher. The wind began to pick up and Harry shivered, wishing he had a cloak. The other three looked rather uncomfortable, too.

The wind blew harder, and Harry wrapped his arms around himself. He recalled the last time they had been here. There should have been lightning bolts, but they weren't coming...

Hermione began to look puzzled, then worried. Ginny's mouth opened, then was forced shut by the heady wind...

Something is going wrong.

The thought came out of nowhere, and some sixth sense made Harry move off his trunk, away from the other three. A moment later, a lightning bolt speared his trunk where he had been sitting.

Harry's jaw dropped and he looked back at his friends. His own shock was mirrored on their faces. The storm was targeting him. What was different? What was going wrong?

In his mind's eye, he saw Madam Pomfrey pour out the water pitcher onto the floor...

He saw Hermione's mouth begin to form the words, "We need to—" and then all sound faded away, along with his sight...

He awoke feeling as if the inside of his mouth was caked in dirt. The rest of his body felt akin to the time when he had woken up inside the coffin, but this time he could open his eyes and see blurry figures, hear muffled sounds.

He tried to lift his hand, but couldn't. It felt as if he was encased in iron. He couldn't make noise. He couldn't move anything but his eyes! Where was he? He couldn't see. What had happened? He tried to scream, and felt a tiny, barely noticeable groan escape his throat.

One of the blurry figures rushed to his side. "Harry, it's Hermione," said the familiar voice, sounding like it was coming from a long way off. "Don't panic, all right? Something happened when we went through the portal. It's going to take you a few weeks to recover. You should have had your magic at full strength before you went through." Harry tried to nod, tried to change his facial features in some way to show that he had heard, but all he could do was move his eyes. It made sense. A muggle or squib could not use the portal, and he technically was one right now. The thought hurt.

"We're in the tent," Hermione continued. "Remember, the one we bought in Diagon Alley? We're camped out in the forbidden forest, and Ron and Ginny are trying to cook." There was a note of humor injected into her voice. Harry couldn't tell if it was fake or not. He tried to smile. He couldn't.

"I'm going to give you a potion," said Hermione, sounding choked. "The next time you wake up, you should be able to move, all right?"

He didn't feel her hand forcing his mouth open. He barely felt the liquid going down his throat. He did his best to stay calm and not panic while the potion did its work, but it was hard when he couldn't feel anything.

Hermione was right. The next time he woke, he could move, though it felt as though he was moving through water. He did his best to

unsteadily sit up and put his glasses on. He kept missing the glasses when he touched the bedside table. When he tried to put them on, he kept missing his face. He wanted to laugh with someone, but no one was there and he didn't feel like laughing anyway.

He had managed to put them on upside down when Ginny appeared, gently took them from him, and settled them on his nose. He smiled slowly, since his muscles didn't respond fast.

"Ron and Hermione went out to look for Hermione's parents," she said, sitting on the bed in front of him. She looked sad. She sounded sad. Harry got the immense feeling that he had missed something important.

"Look...for..." he forced his mouth to form the words. It was difficult, those muscles having just as much trouble moving as those in his arms. He knew it was also out of some unwillingness to come back to the world he really lived in, not just the imitation they had just come from.

"Things have changed a lot," said Ginny sadly.

Harry settled for raising his eyebrows. Even this was a trial.

"We talked to a few people up at the school. Hogwarts is still running, of course. But somehow they expanded it into somewhere where the families of all the students could live as well. Everyone seems to be there except for some of the Slytherin parents." She sighed. "I don't know what happens to the people who don't have kids attending Hogwarts. They go into hiding, I guess. Diagon Alley has been shut down. Everything is running by Owl Order now. No one goes outside, and the Floo is private. You can only come from certain fireplaces into Hogwarts.

"Hermione was sure something bad happened to her parents because they weren't at the school. She and Ron are on their way to her house right now. They said they would contact me through the tattoos, but they should have been there by now. I guess we'll get the call any minute."

They sat in tense silence for a few minutes. Eventually, Harry made a vague effort to stand up and collapsed on the floor. At the same time, Ron's voice came out of thin air, sounding anxious and stressed.

"Ginny. We need you to get to Hogwarts right now. Hermione and I are going to side-along apparate the Grangers to the edge of the path, but they're going to need help immediately. Can you get Pomfrey?"

"Yes," said Ginny at once, and they both felt the connection close. She gave him a quick smile. "I'll get back quickly," she said, grabbing her shoes and wand. "Don't move, all right?" Harry rolled his eyes. Where was he going to go, magicless and barely able to walk?

Ginny looked out the small tent window, and Harry could tell she was sizing up the distance between the school and the tent. He remembered that she couldn't Apparate yet. But there had to be a faster way than walking. His eyes fell on his trunk, which he had neglected to charm locked before they commenced their journey.

"Firebolt," he said harshly, the word crackling in his throat.

"Thanks, Harry," she said, flashing him a quick smile, although he could tell that she was still very worried about the Grangers. She grabbed the broom and ran for the door, flying away towards the school and leaving Harry entirely alone on the floor.

He slowly reached for the bed, his fingers catching the covers. He pulled, and the cover fell off the bed on top of him. He rolled himself up in it. The thought of attempting to get back up on the bed was out of his reach.

He woke and wondered when he had fallen asleep. It was dark outside.

"Ginny?" he called, meeting surprisingly little resistance from his vocal cords. No answer. "Hermione? Ron?"



Nothing. Forgetting for a moment why he was alone in the house, lying weakly on the bed, he reached for his wand on the bedside table and touched it to the lion tattoo, which had wandered down to his left leg. "Gi—"

He woke up the next time to the familiar white walls of the Hogwarts Hospital wing. There were two equally familiar figures seated around his bed.

"What happened?"

He saw Ron roll his eyes. "You tried to use magic, you ponce. You know you weren't supposed to."

"We came back and found you unconscious on the floor, holding your wand," added Ginny. "We thought it was safe to move you now, and Madam Pomfrey is taking care of you."

Harry looked around and saw that the matron was, indeed, bustling around two figures in the beds opposite...

"Hermione! What happened to your parents?" he asked quickly, his memories rushing back.

Hermione wasn't near his bed, he suddenly noticed. She was sitting between the two beds that Harry presumed contained her parents.

"We got there at the right time," said Ron quietly, looking warily at Hermione. "If we had been there a second later..." he sighed. "It was burning, Harry. She fell to pieces when she saw the house on fire. There were only three Death Eaters there, though. I guess they thought it would be an easy job, since we hadn't been around in so long."

"Who?" asked Harry, dreading the answer.

"Dolohov and two younger ones," said Ron, shivering. "I tell you, it was right creepy to kill someone again when you've already seen them dead once."

Harry nodded, recalling the fate that the previous Dolohov had met. A cold fury filled his veins. He was exhausted and helpless without his magic, and out there was someone he had already killed, wreaking havoc...

"Did we know the other two?" he asked, less out of curiosity than of wanting to prolong the coming tale.

"One of them was Marcus Flint," said Ron grimly. "I could tell by the voice. Remember? The Slytherin Quidditch captain from so long ago?" Harry nodded. "Well, I didn't wait around to find out who the other one was, with the situation and all..."

Harry nodded to show that he understood. He could tell there was something bad coming.

"I went in alone. I told Hermione to stay out, and it looked like she was going to." Ron took a deep breath. "I thought there were only the two junior Death Eaters there at first. They had the Grangers under the Cruciatus curse, and they were all cut up and bleeding, broken..." he stood up and turned away, but they could still hear him speaking. Harry half wished he couldn't.

"I've met the Grangers. They never did anything to anyone. They're just like Hermione. They didn't deserve it." Ron turned back to Harry, who flinched at the intensity in his eyes.

"I attacked them the way I did Pettigrew. I told you about that. I just went for them with my fists, magic, feet, anything. They weren't expecting it. I think I broke on of their necks, and the other one...the other one yelled before I could Silence him. We were dueling when Dolohov got there.

"I think I would have died if Hermione hadn't...followed me in. She saw her parents. I had just Stunned the other Death Eater when Dolohov disarmed me and had me at wandpoint. Hermione came around the back. She didn't even bother with magic. We were in the kitchen, and she just grabbed a steak knife and stabbed him."

“Did he...” Harry began. He didn’t want to ask the question. He would sound cold, as if he only cared about whether Dolohov had died, not about the fact that one of his best friends had stabbed a man...

“He survived, we think,” said Ginny. “It was only in the back. He Apparated out. But Harry, when Hermione came back, she was in hysterics. She kept calling herself a murderer. I don’t know what to do. What do I say to her?” it sounded rhetorical. Harry knew he wasn’t the best for that sort of thing either way.

The words were left unsaid: You’ve stabbed people. You know what it’s like.

A murderer? The word didn’t come close to what Harry was, if Hermione was blaming herself for stabbing one man, not even mortally wounding him. He kept it at bay, the feeling of Gryffindor’s sword cutting smoothly through flesh and bone, the screams of people feeling the blade pass through their vital organs...he couldn’t let the feelings rush into him, because he knew they would overwhelm him. It was a wall he had built during the few Occlumency sessions he had forced himself through, and it worked, but he supposed Hermione had no such wall...

“Are the Grangers...all right?” asked Harry, fearing the answer.

“They were under the Cruciatus for a long time,” whispered Ginny. “Madam Pomfrey Healed their physical injuries in a moment, but she doesn’t know what to do about the mental part. She says she won’t know until after they wake up.”

Harry sighed heavily as Ron sat down again. “Have you seen...everyone from the Order?”

The two Weasleys shook their heads. “We haven’t seen anyone except Madam Pomfrey,” said Ginny. “We wanted to wait until you were up so we could all talk to them ourselves.”

It amazed him, when he thought about it, just how well they seemed to act as a unit these days. Thought how they had managed to keep their presence a secret, with the gossipy Madam Pomfrey, was beyond him.

“Anyways, I’m glad you’re up,” continued Ginny. “We need to get Hermione out of here. She isn’t doing anything, just getting herself more depressed. We’re going to go see everyone, and hopefully distract her enough that Pomfrey will have a definite answer on her parents by the time we get back here.”

“Sounds good,” Harry said, attempting to swing his legs over to the side of the bed the way he regularly did. His legs, however, failed to respond in the usual way and he found himself wrapped bizarrely around Ginny, who jumped up in shock, knocking him off the bed.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Harry!” she said, reaching down to help him up. “You can lean on me.”

“Nah, she’s a foot shorter than you,” said Ron. “Here.” He moved closer, but Harry stood, swaying.

“It’s all right, I don’t need support,” he protested. “Look, I’m standing fine by myself.” He brushed Ron away. Ginny shrugged. He found himself thinking that she would normally have argued. He could tell she was still angry. She would have laughed off the fact that he had accidentally curled himself around her, and probably lay down on top of him...he sighed, and took an unsteady step.

In truth, he could still feel some of the stiffness that had come with his depletion of magical reserves. He knew that Ron and Ginny could still see it, but he wasn’t going to admit it and he didn’t want them to.

“Hermione?” asked Ginny carefully, walking over to the other girl and putting her hands on her shoulders. Hermione jerked, then resumed her hunched posture next to her parents. Ginny leaned down and whispered something in her ear, and Hermione finally turned. The two commenced with a whispered conversation and Harry, feeling unsteady, leaned against the wall.

Finally Hermione stood up and smiled wanly at Harry. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," said Harry, irritated at everyone's habit of asking this constantly. They all knew what had happened and what the consequences were. They didn't need him to confirm it.

"How—" he glanced at the Grangers but noted Ginny's frantic head-shaking just in time. "—are we going to let everyone know we're back?"

"We'll see someone the second we step outside here," said Ron grumpily. "You know how Hogwarts works. And it'll be even worse now that all the parents are here."

Ginny and Harry looked automatically to Hermione for the routine sarcastic remark, but she was looking worriedly at her parents.

"All right, let's just go," said Harry hurriedly. He pushed off the wall and walked briskly toward the door of the Hospital Wing, or rather stumbled briskly. Ron caught up with him when he was almost out the door.

"Watch out, or she'll put you on another stretcher," he said, glancing uneasily at Hermione.

Harry snorted slightly, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. They were out of the hospital wing. Now they were walking down the stairs, now on a moving staircase, headed toward the Great Hall...

"Ronald and Ginevra Weasley!"

Harry turned around slowly, smiling blissfully at hearing the familiar shout of the Weasley matriarch.

They were home. Everything had changed; Hogwarts contained half the wizarding population of Britain, Hermione's parents were hurt, he and Ginny were acting coldly polite toward each other, and Ron and

Hermione were in the Hate phase of the their Love-Hate relationship. He wondered whether it had even been the right decision, to wander off to another world and stay in close proximity to each other for months on end, stretching all their relationships to the limit.

He hadn't admitted it to anyone, but he was madly looking forward to seeing who he thought of as the "real" Neville, as well and the Weasley Twins, Luna Lovegood, the DA...he thought of his parents, as cool and formal as they had been in their enormous house with the Quidditch Pitch out back. It was something he wished he could have had. And not being the Prophecy Child...that world, though terrifying, had had its advantages.

But it wasn't where they belonged, where he belonged. They were still home in this world, and Harry could feel himself relaxing as Mrs. Weasley pulled all four of them into a tight, warm embrace.

The next two hours passed in a blur of faces, tears, happiness and sadness. This reunion was only the Weasleys; the reunion with the rest of the school and the Order had yet to come.

After Molly got over her happiness at seeing her two youngest children, she delivered one of the most impressive rants Harry had seen over the years. It had ended with her trying to make Ron and Ginny both swear an oath not to put themselves in danger again, which created extreme awkwardness when both refused.

Harry hoped that Molly would see sense soon; an oath like that was not just ridiculous, it was stupid. Sometimes danger was unavoidable.

They flooded back to Grimmauld Place, where an impromptu party was organized by the two new house-elves that occupied the old house. Grimmauld appeared much cleaner and more lived-in than it had before they had left; Harry heard later from Tonks that those of the Order not living at Hogwarts were living at Grimmauld Place.

The House-Elves quickly created a meal for the group, which Harry downed ravenously, content to sit and listen to Ron discuss the strategies of protecting Hogwarts with Charlie.

He didn't remember how they had left off with everyone, except that Ginny had not been expected to leave. But he could tell from how everyone talked that Professor McGonagall had come up with a theory which involved the four of them searching for an important way to defeat Voldemort in Asia. Harry wished that he could have spoken to McGonagall before meeting the Weasleys, at least so that they could have confirmed their stories; he felt very awkward answering questions and hoping that they would not find any inconsistencies.

When Fred asked quickly whether he had seen some sort of tourist attraction in China, Harry shrugged to buy time, looking around the room. He caught an almost imperceptible movement near the fireplace, and squinted at it, but there was nothing there. Feeling suddenly wary, he glanced around toward the kitchen, but saw, once again, nothing...but he could tell something was there.

“Now, I understand that you’re bound by some sort of oath,” said Mr. Weasley earnestly, commanding the attention of the entire table. “But did you at least find whatever it was you were looking for?”

“Yes, we found it,” said Harry, without the heart to tell Mr. Weasley that they would soon have to embark on yet another search, for the Horcruxes themselves, not just the way to destroy them.

“That’s wonderful, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley, beaming. “I’m so glad you’re all back.”

Harry was sitting on his bed in their room in Grimmauld, in which nothing apparently had changed, when Ron opened the door, looking unhappy.

“She’s never going to forgive us if we leave again,” he said, sounding irritated. “And we need to. She wants Ginny and I to go back to Hogwarts, and probably you and Hermione too. Not that Hermione’s against it. I think she wants to live in the hospital wing.” He flung himself down on his bed.

Harry put down the Occlumency book he had been reading. Well, not so much reading as staring at it.

“What do you think we should do?” in truth, he had been thinking about going for the search immediately, but he had not wanted to push too hard, especially with Hermione’s situation.

“We need to leave. If Hermione won’t come, we won’t tell her where we’re going. But as long as we stay here, Mum’s going to put more pressure on us to stay longer and we’ll never get away.”

“I’m with Ron,” came a quiet voice from the door, and Harry looked up to see Ginny, holding her Pygmy Puff in one hand. Arnold had been looking rather depressed ever since they got back. Ginny had put it down to lack of attention when she had been gone.

“What about Hermione?” asked Harry, unsure himself why he was arguing. She’ll want to stay here, but you know she’ll feel bad if we go without her. She might even try to stop us.”



They all looked at each other. The suggestion hovered between them, none of the three daring to speak it.

“We can’t leave without telling her,” Ron answered the unasked question. “She’ll kill us.”

“When will we leave?” asked Harry carefully.

“We need to talk to McGonagall, Dumbledore’s Portrait...” Harry tried to think of someone else. “Whoever else we need to update on the situation. Why don’t we go to Hogwarts tomorrow?”

“Er...because we’ll see everyone?” said Ron. “And they’ll see us and ask us exactly where we’ve been?”

“Go with the story McGonagall gave our parents?” suggested Ginny.

“No, we can’t,” said Harry, thinking. “Your parents know how heavily involved we all are with the war. The rest of Hogwarts doesn’t. We don’t want Pansy Parkinson running to her parents and telling them that we’ve been off looking for something.”

“They do know we’re involved,” protested Ginny. “Obviously you are, and they’ll probably think something’s going on after the Department of Mysteries, and the DA, and what happened at the end of last year. We were the only ones fighting!”

“That doesn’t mean we can tell everyone we were looking for a way to defeat Voldemort!” Harry said irately. “We’re not showing off here, Ginny! If we screw up here, there’s no better world to go back to!”

“Watch it, Harry,” said Ron as Ginny glared at him.

“It’s true,” said Harry, not backing down.

“Fine. Do you have a story worked out, then?” said Ginny coldly.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. Tell them...we were on vacation, or something. No one will believe it, but at least they won't know what we were actually doing."

"And then we can mysteriously vanish again? What will we tell them then?"

"We don't have to tell them why we're leaving. We don't even have to tell them we're leaving at all."

"I don't like this," muttered Ron.

"I actually came in here to show you this," said Ginny, tossing down the Daily Prophet on the bed. "No one told us. They assumed we knew."

Ron grabbed the paper and scanned it, then tossed it to Harry.

MINISTRY OF MAGIC ATTACKED! Screamed the headline. MINISTER MURDERED! In slightly smaller type beneath. Harry stared at the story.

"That's why everyone is living here or at Hogwarts," said Ginny quietly. "Diagon Alley has been shut down. The whole Wizarding World is practically in a lockdown. No one goes outside."

"Except us," muttered Ron. "We have to."

"Oh, bollocks," said Harry suddenly. "We can't leave Hermione behind. She's the only one who knows how to make the potion to destroy the Horcrux, and do the spell or whatever else it is."

"Can she write it down?" asked Ron.

"And who's going to make it?" Harry asked brusquely. "None of us are Potions Masters. We need to talk to her."

“I’ll get her,” said Ginny, leaving the room. Ron avoided Harry’s gaze.

“Why do you want her to stay here so much?” Harry asked. “I mean, it’s a decent idea, but I thought you of all people would be against it.”

Ron said nothing, and Harry decided to drop the subject, luckily as Ginny returned with Hermione.

They had returned to Hogwarts just after supper to visit the Grangers. Madam Pomfrey said that they had stabilized but would still be in bed for several weeks. They had not yet woken up, and despite the matron’s assurances, all four still feared the worst, Hermione more than the others.

After several hours of no movement by the Grangers, they had coaxed Hermione away from the Hospital wing and back to Grimmauld Place. She looked ragged, but her eyes were glinting.

“You weren’t actually going to leave without me, were you?” she asked quietly. She was talking to Harry, but her eyes were on Ron. Harry frowned. Hermione was angry, he could tell.

He had fallen into the role of unofficial leader of the group, since the other universe more than any other time. None of the other three had challenged it, and he had been glad of it, but Hermione was now. She was testing him, and he knew he had to pass.

“No, we weren’t. That’s why Ginny went and got you so we could discuss what to do,” said Harry, staring back at her challengingly. “Did you want to stay here, with your parents?” he did his best not to sound too sympathetic, knowing that that would likely cause Hermione to fall to pieces again. “We could really use you wherever we’re going.”

“Where are you going?” asked Hermione, in a “have you thought about this at all” voice.

“Out of this house, to start,” Harry responded calmly. “We need to get away from everyone who’s watching us. And then...” test, he thought. “I don’t know. Do you have an idea of where we should go from here? Was there anything in the Horcrux book that could have helped us?”

“There was, actually,” said Hermione, not breaking the eye contact. “A locating spell. You’ll need me to come with you to perform it, of course.”

“Did I say you weren’t coming?”

Hermione sighed and looked away. “No, you didn’t. You’re right, Harry. We should go now, before we get some sort of tracking spell put on us.”

“What? Why?” asked Harry, nonplussed. “They wouldn’t, would they? Everyone looked so...happy to have us back, it didn’t look like they were even thinking of...”

“Oh, they were thinking it, all right,” Hermione said, shaking her head pityingly. “I could see it in their faces. They weren’t satisfied with what McGonagall told them. And the Weasleys certainly aren’t the only ones who knew about us coming back.”

“Pomfrey is a member of the Order,” Harry remembered out loud. “And...there was someone else in the room when we were eating. I thought I was seeing things, but I think there was someone there under an invisibility cloak.”

She had seen it in their faces? What did that mean? Harry stared at Hermione, then back down at the Occlumency and Legilimency book that was slightly more dog-eared than when they had bought it.

“There were probably a few,” said Ron, glaring at the wall. “They don’t trust us.”

“This is our family we’re talking about,” protested Ginny. “Sure, they might not have been satisfied with McGonagall’s story, but they wouldn’t spy on us as soon as we got back.”

“They wouldn’t,” Hermione agreed. “I doubt they knew about it. Pomfrey probably informed the Order about us, and the more cautious ones like Moody—”

“The insane ones,” muttered Ron.

“—it was probably him who ordered spies, or who spied himself,” finished Hermione. “We don’t even know if there isn’t someone right in this room now, listening...”

“There isn’t,” said Harry dismissively. The three others stared at him.

“I can tell,” he said, realizing what he had just stated. “I dunno. I could tell there were some people in the room at dinner, and I can tell there’s no one near us now.”

“That’s kind of weird, mate,” said Ron, looking at Harry sidelong.

“A lot of weird things have happened to us,” Ginny pointed out. “Case in point...” she glanced over at Ron’s luggage. It opened by itself and the contents threw themselves out and all over the room.

“Hey!” he protested.

“I’m just pointing out that we’re all different, ever since we got back from the other world,” Ginny said, as Ron waved his wand and everything flew back into his trunk.

“You’re right,” said Harry. “We’re all better fighters, I can sense where people are in a room, Ginny has this odd wandless magic, and Hermione knows legilimency...” he glanced up at her, seeing her eyes widen.

“You do, don’t you,” he said quietly. It had been a shot in the dark, but... she had read it from their faces? No one could do that so well except perhaps Dumbledore.

“I read the book, since you didn’t seem to be interested in it,” said Hermione defensively. “I didn’t want to waste it.”

“Have you been...” Ron waved his hand at his own head, clearly not wanting to voice the thought.

“Have you been going through our thoughts?” Harry asked, completing it.

“No!” Hermione looked scandalized. “I’m not even very good at Legilimency yet! Harry, even your weak little Occlumency shield can keep me out. I can just pick up thoughts that people are projecting really obviously, from the front of their minds, and there were a lot of thoughts in that room at dinner that were wondering where we had been.”

“But it might not have been our family, then,” said Ginny. “It could have been the extra people that Harry sensed in the room.”

“That’s off topic,” said Harry, who had noted the phrase “weak little Occlumency shield”. “Were you going to tell us or not, Hermione?”

“Of course I would have told you! I just don’t really know anything yet!” Hermione looked angry. “I would have told you as soon as I got decent at it, but I really am not right now!” she looked frustrated, and Harry wondered how long she had been working at Legilimency.

“Are you sure you haven’t been in our heads at all?” Ginny asked, looking at Hermione, who by now looked close to tears.

“No! I haven’t! What kind of person do you think I am?”

There was silence, and then Ginny wandlessly levitated the bed that she was sitting on and dropped it abruptly.

“What’s happening?” she asked. “We need to figure out why this stuff is happening to us. We need to pay another visit to Dumbledore’s portrait.”

Harry threw himself back onto the bed. He didn’t want to talk to Dumbledore again. He hadn’t enjoyed talking to the creepy, flat version of his Headmaster the first time, and certainly didn’t want to go back.

And his “weak Occlumency shield” or whatever Hermione had said. It was one thing to protect his mind from an enemy, but another thing entirely to protect himself from one of his best friends. He really should read the bloody book.

“We were planning to go to Hogwarts tomorrow anyways,” said Ron. “Then we can leave directly from there. We have that tent. We can camp in the Forbidden Forest, where we were before, and when we have a lead on a Horcrux we can go find it. But the tent needs to be our base, not this house.”

Ginny yawned. “When are we getting up tomorrow?”

“Be casual,” responded Harry, thinking. “We’ll just...say we’re going for a visit to Hogwarts, leave a note, and not come back.”

Ginny sighed. “I still feel bad about it, though. Mum really did look terrible.”

“It has to be done,” whispered Hermione.

The two girls left after a few more minutes of finalizing the plan, and Harry lay back in bed, resolutely picked up the Occlumency book, and began to read.

“Why can’t I do anything?” came Ron’s voice suddenly from the other side of the room.

“What?” asked Harry absentmindedly. Chapter 1, page 1 was turning out to be quite a trial. He had had to pull out a magical dictionary twice already.

“Weren’t you listening to yourself talk? Hermione’s smart and can mess around in our minds, and can read the future or something. You can suddenly sense where people are around you, which would be damn useful in a duel, I’ll add, and you have a bloody great sword and know how to use it. Even Ginny somehow has some weird extra thing that she never had before. You can all be animagi except me so far. Why am I the bloody worst at everything?” he finished, glaring at the wall.

“No...” said Harry carefully, casting around in his mind to think of something that Ron was better than everyone at. “What about...chess? You beat us all at that, even Hermione.”

“Fat lot of help chess is.”

“You’d probably be a great military strategist,” said Harry, frowning in thought. “If this war ever actually becomes a full-out war, you’ll be the most useful of all of us, because you can see the big picture.”

“Wizard wars aren’t muggle wars, Harry,” said Ron, shaking his head. “And they certainly aren’t chess. What I want to know is, the rest of you seem to have come through that dimension-travel with an extra ability. What’s mine?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry, slightly alarmed at this thread of conversation. “Are you sure you got one? How do you know that all this came from the dimension travel?”

“It seem obvious,” said Ron, shrugging. “Makes sense, doesn’t it? If Ginny had really had wandless magic, she would have shown it when she was younger. And Hermione, a seer?”

“Wait, how did you know that?” Harry asked suddenly. That was what had been niggling at him since Ron’s first speech. As far as he knew, Ron hadn’t been told at all.



“As much as it may surprise you, I also have a brain,” said Ron, rolling his eyes. “I noticed when she went from ready to stay in the other world for another year to suddenly wanting to leave as fast as we could. And then she wanted to go and check on her parents as soon as we got back. And when we got there, surprise, her parents were in trouble and we had arrived at just the right time. I’m not that stupid, Harry.”

“You think that for sure, then? It could have just been a coincidence.”

“I asked her. She wouldn’t deny it once I figured it out.” He grinned suddenly. “Imagine that. Hermione Granger, hater of all divination arts, is a seer.”

“Not like Trelawney, though,” said Harry carefully. “She can’t be a real seer if she can remember her visions.”

“Nah, she’s just a better one than Trelawney, of course,” said Ron happily.

Harry, happy that they had least gotten off the topic of Ron’s lack of skills, joined in the belittling of the batty divination teacher with glee. Preying on the back of his mind, however, was the fact that every prophecy ever heard had had a recording by the one who had heard it, not by the seer. Maybe Hermione was something different, but Harry had gotten the impression that no seer ever remembered their visions.

He felt his eyes droop as he once again encountered a word in the book with over four syllables. “Nox,” he said vaguely, waving his wand at the light, plunging them into darkness. They had a long day coming.

“What are we going to tell everyone?” asked Hermione quietly as they sat at the breakfast table in front of the Floo fireplace. “We never really decided that.”

“I think we should go with Harry’s idea,” said Ron, grinning. “Do you know how frustrated all the little Death Eaters will be if they’re told we were on vacation?”

“It will make Voldemort curious,” Hermione argued. “He won’t believe it. It’s impossible.”

“He’ll be curious when we come back any way,” said Harry. “And the first thing he’ll do is check his Horcruxes, I bet.”

“He hasn’t needed to in years,” argued Ron. “He’ll think you were...training, or something.”

“Which we were, of sorts,” added Ginny quietly.

Hermione frowned in thought, and then looked up.

“What is it?” asked Harry, knowing Hermione’s “idea” face when he saw it. She looked hesitant, though.

“There is one way you can be sure that Voldemort will think you were doing something else,” she said, sounding troubled.

“I’m not going to like this,” muttered Ron. “I just know it.”

“What is it?” asked Ginny. “Don’t be so negative, Ron. You haven’t heard any of the idea yet.”

“I think I know what it is,” said Harry, having come to one conclusion. Hermione glanced at him.

“One word: Snape.”

“This is a bad idea,” Ron protested once again as they trudged through Hogwarts’ halls toward McGonagall’s office. They had left

their trunks in the forbidden forest once more, in the clearing where they had previously set up the tent.

They were counting on no students seeing them until later in the day; they had not yet finalized their story. Harry had checked the marauder's map several times already and the way was currently still clear.

"We have no way of contacting Snape except through McGonagall," said Harry absently, having explained it once before. "We don't even have to talk to him, we can just pass along the message to McGonagall. She can help us with our alibi, too." He smiled ruefully. "It needs some work."

They were planning on saying that they had been off searching for the way Voldemort had become immortal. Hermione had looked up where Nicholas Flamel had done much of his research, a small town in Ireland. They would lead Voldemort to think that they believed that he had become immortal through use of a Philosopher's Stone.

"There is more than one, of course," Hermione had explained. "Flamel's was the only one that could turn anything to gold, so that made it the most valuable and famous. There were others which could create the elixir of life, but with..." her brow had wrinkled. "Some sort of side effect, is all I know. Anyways, it will make Voldemort think that we're on the wrong track completely."

It was a shaky plan and they all knew it, but Harry was hoping that McGonagall would be able to firm it up into something believable.

He opened his mouth at the gargoyle, but before he could try to ask McGonagall to let them in, the door opened for them. They stood in silence on the revolving staircase, and finally entered to see Minerva McGonagall sitting at her desk, innocently working on some paperwork. Harry frowned. Why had the gargoyle let them in?

“Ah, Mr. Potter,” she said, looking up and smiling, then turning to greet each of the others. “I’m glad you’re finally back. Your trip was successful, of course. I have already heard about it.”

Harry allowed the other three to make small talk, while he tried to surreptitiously look around the room. There was someone else in here, but they were obviously invisible, and moving around silently. He carefully drew his wand, trying to make sure no one else saw.

Stupefy, he thought silently when the figure was right beside him. There was a brief moment of silence when his stunner flew at the wall and smashed an antique teapot that hadn’t been there the last time Harry had seen this office.

“Very good, Potter,” came a silky voice that Harry knew all too well. “Able to sense me under the cloak and cast non-verbal spells. The little golden boy is growing up.” The invisibility cloak was thrown off with a flourish. “Occlumency still shabby, of course. I knew what you were going to do at the same time you did.”

Harry stared at Snape. It had been five months since he had seen the Potions Master. There were new lines on his face, and his expression was harder. Harry restrained himself from glaring when he saw the Death Eater mask protruding from one of the folds inside the deep black robes the man was clothed in.

Ginny clearly had no such restraint. The mask burst into flame and Snape’s wand flew toward her with such force that she had to step back several feet when she caught it.

“You forgot about his friends, professor, when you were so busy going through his mind,” she said icily.

Snape’s poise did not change, he merely looked at Ginny intently. “Wandless? I wasn’t aware that that came with the Weasley line.” He pulled the mask out of his robe and extinguished it with a wave of his hand. It was undamaged.

“A lot of flames at Death Eater gatherings,” he said, smiling unpleasantly. “Control your impulses, please, Miss Weasley. There are more important things at stake.”

Harry looked at his three friends. Hermione was looking curiously at Snape’s hand, and Harry realized that the spy had also used wandless magic. Ron was glaring hard at Snape, but refraining from speaking, which Harry was grateful for. Ginny was gripping Snape’s wand hard enough that her knuckles were turning white.

“If you would return my wand, Miss Weasley,” said Snape softly. “We are all on the same side here.”

“How do we know that?” spat Ron. “Master Occlumens that you are, how do we know you really killed Dumbledore on his orders?”

Snape’s expression did not change by a flicker. Harry suspected that he had heard about the deed so much in the past few months that he was used to it. Harry himself still winced.

“As I would not like you going through the contents of my mind, Weasley, you shall have to trust me,” he said, and Harry noticed a note of condescension in Snape’s voice that had not been there when the man spoke to the others.

McGonagall sat silently, watching the exchange. Slowly, Ginny walked forward and offered Snape his wand, despite Ron’s pointed grunting.

As soon as Snape got his wand back, he twitched it and McGonagall froze behind her desk, looking as though she had been petrified, but in a sitting position.

Snape turned away from the headmistress to find himself facing four wands and a sword. His lips curled into something that looked vaguely like a smile, though it failed to reach beyond his mouth.

“Nice trinket, Potter. Put them down. You know that was necessary.”

“Why?” Harry asked challengingly.

Snape snorted. “She’s been under a lot of pressure from the ministry, the Order and your family to produce you. That one,” he jerked his head at the sleeping Phineas Nigellus on the wall, “Is spying for the Order. They don’t know where you were. Minerva is not as in control of that lot as she thinks she is.”

“What do you mean?”

Snape sighed. “Put the sword down, Potter. I am not speaking to you as a teacher anymore. I know what you have gone through, and while it is nothing to what we who survived the first war felt, I am speaking to you as one fighter for the light side to another.”

Harry stared into the black depths of Snape’s eyes, and didn’t find anything. He suddenly wished, even more, that he had studied Occlumency more thoroughly. He lowered the sword, but kept his wand trained on Snape.

“Constant Vigilance, of course,” said Snape scathingly. “Let me tell you something, Potter. Alastor Moody has learned the prophecy. I am unsure as to how. He believes that it is in your best interest to stay here and learn to fight, kill Voldemort for them, and then quietly go off somewhere else and stop interfering with his life. He has no idea of the complications, and has no need to. But much of the Order is beginning to follow his lead. It is in their best interests, as well as the ministry’s, to keep you here.”

“Why aren’t you with them?” asked Ginny.

“I am never ‘with them’ as you say, Miss Weasley,” said Snape quietly. “Minerva is my only contact within the order. They didn’t trust me before, and they certainly would not now, whatever Albus’ portrait said to them.” Harry glanced over at the portrait, which was watching quietly.

“Bad move, Potter,” said Snape, reaching forward to pluck Harry’s wand out of his hand. “Never take your eyes off the target.” He

returned the wand as Harry struggled to keep his temper under control.

“Now, what is your story for Voldemort?” asked Snape quietly, still completely unperturbed at having four wands pointed at him.

“Why not just take it out of our heads?” asked Harry scornfully.

“It is called common courtesy,” said Snape coolly. “All right. I shall place my wand on the table, here.” He did so with great precision, making Ron growl.

“You four shall do so as well. We all acknowledge that we possess other weapons. One of wizardkind’s greatest failings, I have always thought, is their absolute reliance on their wands. Without your wands, of course, young Ginevra could throw me across the room, or Mr. Potter could skewer me. Or I could rip your minds apart. You will be able to do that as well, in time, Granger. You have the gift.”

Harry, vowing even more heavily to learn Occlumency, put his wand down on the table, motioning for the others to follow.

“Thank you. Now, you come back from a dimensional jump armed with a locating spell, and a potion that enables you to destroy the Horcruxes. No, I did not rummage through your heads to find that information. I heard it from Minerva. And now you need to leave again.”

“It shouldn’t take that long,” protested Harry. “We know where they all are now.”

“There were certain safeguards on the one that you looked for with Professor Dumbledore, were there not?”

“Yes,” said Harry, his hand involuntarily going to his pocket, where the locket was.

“It may take some time for you to break through them, then, correct?”

“And I won’t have professor Dumbledore with me this time,” Harry muttered, more to himself than to anyone else.

“Yes.” Said Snape, looking at him intently. “I will Obliviate Minerva McGonagall for you while you leave on your search.” He bowed his head slightly. “Good luck.”

“That man is a demon,” said Ron, shaking his head in wonder, as they walked across the lawn to the Forbidden Forest.

“How did he do that?” Hermione said, sounding frustrated. “He completely steered that conversation. There were so many things we needed to ask him. Why isn’t Dumbledore stopping Phineas Nigellus from betraying McGonagall? Why does Moody want to keep us here? That explanation wasn’t nearly enough. Why was he in that office in the first place? Did he know we were coming?”

Harry had many questions as well, but they were more along the lines of: Why had Snape treated them so civilly, almost like equals? He had almost been teaching them, reproving when Harry had done something wrong, looking cynically impressed when Ginny had disarmed him.

Had his entire six years with Snape been some sort of act to impress the Death Eaters? If the man would kill Dumbledore for his cause, what else would he do?

“I personally don’t believe that he could rip our minds apart like he said,” said Hermione. “That book we bought wasn’t exactly legal, and it didn’t mention anything like that.”

“He probably learned it from Voldemort, not a book,” said Harry absently, still pondering the mystery of a man that he had known for six years, but never really met.

He looked up to notice that the other three had stopped walking and were looking at him in horror.



“Blimey, I hope your mind doesn’t get ripped apart,” said Ron in a hushed voice. “Voldemort’s in it so much, I mean—”

“Occlumency,” said Harry harshly. “For all of us, all right? We have to learn it. Except for Hermione, I guess.”

They had reached the site where they had dropped their trunks. Harry sat on his, ignoring the scorch mark where the trunk had been struck by magical lightning.

“So where to first, Hermione?”

He watched her open her trunk and carefully retrieve a piece of paper on which she had written the potion instructions and the spell.

“Do you think he was joking about the mind thing?” Ron asked quietly. “Because, I mean, I don’t really fancy Hermione being able to rip my mind apart.”

Harry refrained from rolling his eyes. “I doubt he was joking. It was Snape, after all.” Seeing Ron’s expression, he quickly added, “He was probably exaggerating, though.”

They were interrupted by Hermione’s frustrated huffing.

“The spell isn’t working.”

Harry’s brow creased. “What do you mean?” Spells worked for Hermione. It was one of the rules Harry had lived with for six years. This was worrying.

“Nothing happens when I say the incantation,” she snapped.

“Are you doing the right wand movement?” asked Ginny, looking up from where she had been studying the potion that Hermione had written down.

“I’m positive,” she said angrily. There was a moment of silence.

“So are we staying here tonight, then?” asked Ron cautiously. “Because, I mean, it’s a bit cold out here, and I’d like to set up the tent if we aren’t going anywhere.” He reeled back at Hermione’s irate glare, but Harry saw his point. October was ending, and he was wishing that he was wearing somewhat heavier clothing at the moment.

“I’ll figure out what’s wrong. I’m positive this is right. It’s not a Latin word I recognize, but it has the right ending...” she trailed off into mumbles and began rooting through her trunk for, presumably, another book. Harry shrugged at Ron, who was surreptitiously unpacking the tent.

“Not here,” said Ginny. “We’re too close to the edge of the forest. Hermione, they’re right. You can research what’s wrong with the spell tonight, maybe borrow Harry’s Cloak to get into the Library at Hogwarts. But if we aren’t going anywhere, we should have a place to sleep.”

“I suppose,” said Hermione, already looking absorbed in the book. Harry could understand her anger. They had worked hard for that incantation; rather, Hermione had, in order to get it from the Malfoys’ library. It couldn’t be a fake, could it?

Within an hour, they were several miles further in the forest, in a section that Harry was fairly sure they would not be ravaged by centaurs, acromantula, or other wild beasts of the forest. It was along a fairly safe path that Hagrid had taken the Care of Magical Creatures class on in their fifth year, pointing out Bowtruckle nests.

He and Ginny studied the kitchen. They had been placed on meal duty while Ron was reluctantly enlisted to help find out what was wrong.

“Do we have to do anything with this?” asked Harry carefully, looking at the full roast goose that they had produced from the meal spells he had bought in the camping store.

Ginny shrugged. "I don't know. Mum never used those things. She always made it herself." She poked the goose cautiously.

"Are we supposed to put anything in its mouth? Because, I mean, the ones at Hogwarts always have an apple or something."

"That's pigs, silly," giggled Ginny as Harry poked his finger into the goose's mouth. It closed with a snap. Harry froze, and looked at Ginny, who was outright laughing now.

"That wandless magic is something, isn't it. You're really learning how to control it." Harry carefully extracted his finger from the goose's mouth, deciding never to mention it to Ron or Hermione.

"I guess I am," sighed Ginny. "I don't exactly have a teacher, though. You saw what happened with Snape's wand."

"That was brilliant," protested Harry. "He wasn't prepared for it at all."

"And next time, he will be. We shouldn't have shown him all of the skills we have."

Harry nodded in silent agreement. They shouldn't have. He supposed they had reached a sort of truce with the Potions' Master today. He wondered if they would see the man again. Spying was risky, however long Snape had been doing it for; the truth of the matter was that he could be dead by tomorrow.

"Where was Snape back in...the other world...anyways?" asked Ginny quietly.

Harry shrugged. It was a question that had bothered him as well. "Maybe there he wasn't on our side. There could be more differences than just the book existing there."

"Or McGonagall just didn't want to mention him to us."

"I guess."

They lapsed into silence. Harry silently sighed. What had caused this awkwardness between them? It was the logical thing to do to come home. After seeing the Grangers, even Ginny had to admit that they had done the right thing by coming back.

He had his suspicions over what was going on between Ron and Hermione, and it was not studying. Their making up always involved a lot of snogging, and he was sure that Ron was intending to make up tonight. Maybe they had expected Harry and Ginny to do the same in here, but it wasn't happening.

Ginny clearly had the same thoughts, as she was looking at him pensively and glancing toward the door where Ron and Hermione were.

He couldn't do it. He didn't have the strength just now to start the conversation he knew they needed to have eventually.

"I'm going to go...go," he said weakly, and all but bolted up the stairs, leaving the sad silence behind him.

The solution to their problem with the location spell came the very next morning.

Inspiration came to Hermione when Ginny opened the door to their tent and discovered a black snake curled around a rock inches from their tent. When it reared up and began moving toward her, Harry shouted “Stop!” in Parseltongue without thinking, reminding him vividly of his second year. However, this time, instead of looking at him in fear, his audience was looking at him in speculation.

“I think the incantation has to be spoken in Parseltongue,” said Hermione quietly over breakfast. Harry choked on his kipper.

“What? Why?”

“There was a snake on the page of the book that gave the incantation. I don’t know why, I just have this feeling...”

Harry shared a look with Ron. When Hermione had feelings, lately it was best to follow them. She was a budding seer, after all.

“All right. What harm could it do?”

“You had better practice it in English first, to get the pronunciation right,” said Ron. “Well, I say English. Whatever language that is, it isn’t English. And I don’t think it’s Latin, either.”

Harry stared at the words on the page in Hermione’s neat printing.

“Salocarene Stepicente?” he tried uncertainly. “This doesn’t look like any of the words in your dictionary, Hermione.”

“I looked them up. They aren’t in there,” offered Ron.

“Salocarene Stepicente,” Hermione corrected. Harry and Ron glanced at each other and burst out laughing.

“Shut up, you two,” huffed Hermione. “Just try it, Harry.”

“Salocarene Stepicente,” Harry repeated dutifully, carefully not making eye contact with Ron. “What does it do, anyways?”

“I believe that it actually places the knowledge in your head of where the Horcrux is that you’re looking for,” said Hermione. “It certainly doesn’t work like any spell I’ve ever seen before.”

“Same with the potion, eh?” said Ron, looking happy at the prospect of Hermione admitting to something she didn’t understand. “I thought putting all those ingredients together would make it explode, but apparently they cancel each other out or some such thing. We were looking at it last night.”

Harry closed his eyes, tuning Ron out, and envisioned a snake in his mind.

“Salocarene Stepicente!”

And he knew.

One in London, right near the heart of the city. One somewhere in the forests of Albania. One straight ahead of him, in Hogwarts, and one...he looked down. He was glowing gently.

Everything went dark.

“Harry? Can you hear me? Harry!” the world returned abruptly as cold water was splashed on his face.

“Ow,” he muttered groggily, more out of irritation than out of pain. “What did you go and do that for?”

“You fainted,” said Hermione, sounding worried. “The book never said anything about that, I’m positive...oh, I wish we could have brought it here, I’m sure I could find out what was wrong if I read it...”

“I’m sure nothing went wrong with the spell, Hermione. I don’t know why I fainted,” he said quietly. Shock, said a voice in his mind. Yes, shock.

He was a horcrux.

He felt dirty, somehow. The knowledge that he had been used by Voldemort as something to carry his soul left Harry feeling unclean, but also looking at events in his life in a whole new light.

Fourth year. Of course Voldemort had needed him for the ceremony; he had needed to use one of his horcruxes to bring him back to the living world. He wouldn't have wanted to tell Pettigrew the location of any of the other ones, so he had fabricated some tale about needing Harry's blood. Or had he? Had Voldemort gotten stronger as well, from taking blood from one of his pieces of soul?

"Harry? Are you listening?" came Hermione's voice, calling him back into the world.

"No. Sorry, I wasn't," he said hoarsely. "There's one in Hogwarts. One in London. One in Albania." He heard Hermione's quill scratching on parchment, and waved a hand to stop her. "Don't bother to write it down. I could lead you right to them. I don't know how." And he could. He knew it. He could feel their locations. He was no longer glowing, and he supposed that it had only been him who could see the light.

"The one in Hogwarts will be easiest, then, I suppose," said Hermione, looking slightly taken aback at Harry's abruptness. "But you said there were four left. Where's the other one?"

The silence trailed on for slightly too long, and then Harry said quickly, "I don't know. It must have gotten destroyed, I think."

"Maybe something went wrong with the spell," said Ron quietly. "Maybe that's why you can only feel three."

"Or one was destroyed already by someone else, and Dumbledore didn't know," added Ginny, speaking up for the first time in the discussion. "He wasn't all-powerful."

“Why doesn’t one of us go ask him?” suggested Ron easily. “With Harry’s Cloak and the Map, it should be easy. I’ll go—”

“No, I will,” interrupted Harry, seeing an opportunity. “I’ll go right now.” He left the room quickly, ignoring the puzzled looks his three friends were giving him.

Once in his room, he sat down on the bed and put his head in his hands.

What the hell was he going to do about this?

The first thought that came was Ginny. It would have been nice, but if Harry had to die to defeat Voldemort, that was what he would do, regardless of how hurt Ginny would be. He would do what had to be done, that was all.

He took a deep breath. Dumbledore. Maybe the old Headmaster would have a solution. Maybe, if he practiced Occlumency enough, he would be able to separate Voldemort’s soul from his own, and somehow remove it.

Split it, almost.

Create his own Horcrux?

No. He wouldn’t be able to do it. Killing he could do, but splitting his soul...what was it Dumbledore had said at one of their lessons last year? The power of a soul, whole and untarnished or something similar. He couldn't do it.

He knelt down and feverishly started going through his trunk, looking for his Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder’s Map. Finding it, he scanned the school quickly, relieved to see that McGonagall was not in her office.

“I’m leaving right now,” he called to Hermione, Ron and Ginny as he sped past them into the forest. He couldn’t look at them right now, and didn’t know when he would be able to.



“Harry, wait!” came a shout from inside the tent, but he kept moving. Moments later, he heard a voice coming through his tattoo.

“Harry, what is going on? Why are you so eager to get to Dumbledore?” it was Ron’s voice, sounding reasonable. Harry growled slightly, running on.

“I just thought of something to ask him, Ron. Besides about the Horcrux. If it turns out right, I’ll tell you about it, okay?”

“What if it doesn’t turn out right?” asked his friend skeptically.

“Then it won’t matter.” Harry closed the connection and changed into his lion form, holding the cloak and map between his teeth. He was at the edge of the forest in minutes.

If anyone would have an answer to this, Dumbledore would. There had to be a way; the headmaster had said something about putting a fragment of soul in a living creature, had he not?

I can remove it. There has to be a way. There has to.

The entrance hall was filled with milling students, and Harry realized that classes must be changing. The reason McGonagall wasn’t in her office was because she was teaching. He stood leaning against the wall, careful not to bump into anyone, waiting for the crowd to pass.

He frowned slightly as Luna Lovegood, looking just as absent-minded as she always had last year, made a beeline for him. There was no way she could see him, was there?

“You’re making a shadow,” she whispered as she came close. “Who are you?” and with a jerk, she tugged the cloak off him before he could react. He snatched it back out of her hands as she dropped it, looking genuinely surprised, but the damage was done.

“Harry?” came a shriek from beyond Luna as Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott realized what was going on.

“No,” he growled, slinging the cloak back around his shoulders and lifting the hood onto his head. Susan and Hannah halted, confusion painting their faces as they looked around to see where he had gone. As they searched, he slipped by and up the stairs toward the head office.

He had been making a shadow? Luna was odd, but that didn’t mean she would suddenly be able to notice tiny details like that, especially in a room full of people.

He felt somewhat guilty for leaving the three girls in confusion the way he had, but he didn’t want to deal with them at the moment. He didn’t want to deal with anything but the...problem he had recently discovered.

“Let me in,” he said to the gargoyle as he arrived at it, realizing he had a new problem: the password.

The gargoyle remained stonily silent.

“Professor Dumbledore, sir?” he tried. “I need to talk to you. Can you please let me in?”

Silence.

“Damn it!”

“I know the password, Harry,” came Luna’s voice. He turned on the spot, almost swearing again as he realized all three girls had followed him, probably taking Luna’s directions. “But you’re going to have to take off the cloak and explain yourself to us first.”

“Why?” said Harry roughly, forgetting for a moment that he was still wearing the cloak, and quite clearly giving away his position. “It isn’t any of your business. What is your business is the password. I need it so I can kill Voldemort.”

Luna continued to stare at him, her wide blue eyes appearing to see right through the Invisibility Cloak. "Do better than that, Harry," she said dreamily. "How do I know it's really you, not an imposter who wants to get into the Head office? You did walk in here under an Invisibility Cloak, remember."

Harry opened his mouth and then quickly shut it again, thinking. He needed to get rid of his anger and sense of urgency to have this conversation.

"I think you would know it was me either way," he said softly. "You can see things like that, can't you? You're looking through my Cloak right now."

She smiled. "Good guess."

"How?"

She shrugged. "I was born with it. Like Dumbledore. He could always see through them too."

"And speaking of Dumbledore..." Harry said, glancing at the gargoyle.

"Fine. I'll make you a deal." Luna sat on the ground. Harry remained standing. "If you tell me why you need to get in, and it's a good reason, I'll tell you the password."

"Luna, I don't really have time for this."

She shrugged, seeming to indicate that he should make time.

He sighed. He couldn't go find McGonagall; she would want him back under her thumb. "All right. But those two leave." He waved his hand, indicating Hannah and Susan, who looked offended despite the fact that they couldn't see him.

"They stay," she said almost lazily. "We won't tell anyone."

“On my word as a Hufflepuff,” added Hannah quickly, looking eager.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, more out of habit from living with Ron for the past few months than from everything else. “What do you want me to tell you?”

“Where you’ve been,” said Susan instantly. “You’re not a fool, Harry, you know Voldemort must be searching for you. Where have you been hiding, and why is it so important to get into the office? Are the two things related?”

Harry glanced at Luna, who nodded for him to answer. He would have to cut down on the truth somewhat.

“Voldemort...has some things that he’s been using to keep himself immortal,” he said slowly. “We’ve been searching for them.”

“So Ron and Hermione are with you?” asked Hannah quickly. Harry glared at her, and she shrugged.

“Obviously,” he said, trying not to get angry. “Anyways, we’ve found one.” Well, it was true. Except for the ‘we’ part. “I need to get in and ask Dumbledore how to destroy it.”

“How would Dumbledore know?” asked Hannah sharply. “Did he tell you about this thing?”

“Of course,” said Luna vaguely. “He’d been destroying them himself. That’s why his hand was dead.” Harry stared at her in shock. He hadn’t expected any of them to make the connection, let alone that fast. Or had Luna known beforehand?

Susan and Hannah were muttering to each other quietly. Harry ignored them, concentrating on Luna.

“Can you let me into the office now? Do you understand that this is important?”

“Oh, I suppose,” said Luna airily. She marched up to the statue. “Voldemort,” she whispered, then glanced at Harry as the gargoyle jumped aside. “McGonagall does her best. I need to talk to you privately.” She shooed Hannah and Susan away, making Harry smile. Luna had certainly grown more confident.

“What was that all about?” he asked when the wall closed and they stood on the stairs on the way up to the office. “Why did they have to stay?”

“You owe it to them,” she said sharply, or as sharply as Luna could sound. “The whole school has been in chaos. They still think you’re the Chosen One, and even though they don’t know that they’re right, they’re waiting for you to come and save them all. At least now they know that you’re doing something against Voldemort.”

“No, Luna, you don’t understand,” said Harry, raking back his hair in frustration. “Having all of Hogwarts know what I’m doing means that Voldemort will know. I don’t want him knowing that I’m even aware of his Horcruxes, let alone searching for and destroying them.” He knew he had said something wrong instantly when her face turned unreadable.

“Horcruxes?” her face gave no indication as to what she knew about them, but he knew she was running through all the knowledge in her head, trying to learn what the word meant.

“Yes,” he said wearily. Maybe he should Obliviate her. He made a mental note to learn how to cast a memory charm.

“Harry?” she was staring at him intently. He realized with a jolt that it looked like she knew what he was talking about. “You’re a Horcrux, aren’t you.” She said it quietly, cutting through his thoughts. He jumped.

“How the bloody hell did you know?” he cursed inwardly the moment he said it. He should have denied it. He should have...done anything that would keep Luna Lovegood from knowing of his situation. He felt a sudden surge of resentment toward the girl. She

hadn't been through all the trials he and his friends had. She had no idea what was going on, things bigger than her and her tiny world.

She ignored his question. "I think I have a way to remove it." She smiled. "It's a bit iffy, though. Maybe a fifty-fifty chance."

Harry groaned, but followed her as she began walking up the stairs. He walked slowly back to the tent, feeling shell-shocked. Luna must have been some sort of seer. It was the only explanation.

She had avoided his questions in a way worthy of Cornelius Fudge. He had been afraid to put his foot down, afraid to lose this possible way of removing the Horcrux from himself. He had had some tiny shred of hope that Luna might have a legitimate idea, that could possibly be verified by Dumbledore.

But once he had heard her idea, he wished he had stopped earlier. It wasn't worth telling her everything he had. It was just another one of Luna's crackpot thoughts. Worse, Professor Dumbledore had had nothing to say; he had looked utterly emotionless when Harry told him of the situation, and then, amid the babble of horrified voices from the rest of the portraits, had informed him gravely that his best chance was to create his own Horcrux.

He sighed and entered the tent. That was something that he knew in his heart that he could not do. Killing out of necessity was one thing; killing someone to prolong one's own life was a completely different thing. He would no longer feel like a warrior, as he convinced himself he was every time Gryffindor's sword sliced through flesh. He would be a murderer, plain and simple.

He could hear voices from the next room, but he wasn't quite prepared to enter normal company yet. Ron would pushily ask what had happened, why he had left so quickly; Hermione, with all her emotional wisdom, would deduce something was wrong...

“What happened?” asked Ginny. He jerked toward the sword, but stopped himself just in time. He hadn’t noticed that she was in the room. She smiled sadly, seeing what had happened.

“Some day, after this war is over, you can let those reflexes go. Someday, we won’t have to worry about being surprised by someone ready to kill us.” She sighed, sitting down in the oversized armchair that Ron and Hermione had been using for their games last night. It looked lonely with only Ginny.

He had to tell someone. He couldn’t keep it a secret, not something this big. Maybe...if he told her, she would understand that they couldn’t be together.

“Ginny...” his voice was rough. He coughed, trying to slow his heartbeat down. How to say it? I’m a Horcrux. I won’t survive this war. We can’t be together.

“I’m going to die,” he whispered.

There was a moment of absolute silence. Then she was getting up, moving...her lips were on his, and they were kissing hard, passionately. He felt wetness on her face, tear tracks, but he was immersed in the feeling of her body pressed to his, her hands in his...

She pulled back and slapped him hard in the face. He reeled back in shock.

“Don’t you dare say that, Harry,” she snapped. “We all know what’s at stake here.” Her voice softened. “You’re different from the last time you faced him. You’re stronger, faster, better. And you have us.”

She reached over and caressed his cheek, leading him over to the chair. “With us behind you, we disarmed Snape in moments when no one has ever done it before. Maybe you have to cast the final curse, but you’re never alone. You’ll never be without me. Do you understand?”

Harry indicated that he understood in the most physical way possible. If he needed any motivation to keep trying, to keep living, it was this. Nothing compared to sitting with Ginny wrapped around him, forgetting about the world, about Luna's theory, about Horcruxes, about Voldemort. All he needed in life, he realized, was this.

Yeah, it's been done, I know. I think I have a pretty unique way of dealing with the horcrux, though.

This fic is coming to a close pretty soon- it's going to be a bit more rushed than I'd like it to be, but I have another fic I want to start posting and with Deathly Hallows coming soon, I need to wrap this up. So my apologies if it seems to be moving too fast, but I'm going to finish it by around chapter 27, hopefully.



“There’s a Horcrux in Hogwarts, right?” asked Hermione cautiously, as Harry lolled around in his chair the next morning.

“What? Oh, yeah,” said Harry, his eyelids drooping. He had gotten very little sleep the previous night; Ginny had arrived in his room around midnight and they had stayed up for hours...

“Why don’t we go retrieve it today? If you can’t still feel them, we could perform the spell again—”

“No,” said Harry quickly. Hermione looked taken aback, and he backed off slightly. “No, I still know where they are.”

“Well, why don’t we go retrieve—”

“Hermione, no one uses the word ‘retrieve’ in ordinary conversation,” said Ron, entering the kitchen and sitting down at the table. Hermione scowled at being interrupted twice in a row.

“It’s a good idea, though,” added Ginny blearily from her place across from Harry. She looked just as sleepy as he felt. “Why don’t Harry and I go and get it and you two can stay and make the potion here.”

“We’ll have to make a trip to Diagon Alley,” said Hermione doubtfully. “Some of those potions ingredients looked pretty uncommon. We might even need to go into Knockturn Alley.”

“And it’s snowing,” added Ron, sticking his head around the tent-flap and out the door. “Hard.”

“Do you know...which Horcrux it is?” asked Hermione, looking at Harry curiously. “What does it feel like, being under this spell? You just know where they are?”

“I dunno which it is,” Harry shrugged. “I can just...feel them, I guess. I can just tell that they’re there. And When I get near one, I think I can recognize them.” He left it at that. He didn’t know when he would tell

them about himself. It was probably unnecessary at any rate; if Luna's idea worked, it would work, and if it didn't...well, it wouldn't matter anyway.

"It's cold," said Ginny, for the third time in as many minutes.

"Yes, I know," Harry growled. They were both precariously balanced on the Firebolt and slowly rising above the trees, in the face of a bitter wind. They had conjured various extremely heavy articles of winter clothing, but the strong wind was doing its best to thwart them.

"Where in Hogwarts is it, anyway?" Ginny shouted in his hear as the wind built.

"I don't know," Harry yelled back. "I can feel it, though. I'll be able to lead us to it."

They reached the gates of Hogwarts with their noses red, rubbing their arms to keep warm. Harry quickly vanished their heavy clothing and threw the Invisibility Cloak over them as Ginny shrunk the Firebolt.

The Entrance hall was draughty, but blessedly warm compared to the outside of the school. It was also empty except for a few students crossing, none of whom Harry recognized.

"That way," he muttered, pointing up the stairs. "A few floors up, I think."

They walked quickly toward the staircase. Harry savored the warmth of Ginny against his side, huddled together with him under the Cloak. He stopped them midway up the stairs and turned to her.

"What—" she began, before he covered her mouth with his.

"So what do we need that you thought wouldn't be sold in Diagon Alley?" Ron asked, wrapping his cloak more tightly around himself.

“Giant blood,” said Hermione, consulting the list she was holding onto. “That’s it, really. The rest we should be able to get from the school.”

Ron looked uneasily around the silent Diagon Alley. They had hoped that there would be an open shop, but most of them appeared to be boarded up, operating only by Owl Order, as they had found when they had first gotten home.

There were several figures moving around Knockturn Alley, going about their business quickly and quietly. Most of the shops here were boarded up as well, some with broken windows and ransacked merchandise, or other signs that the owner had packed up quickly or had been taken forcibly.

“I don’t know if we’re going to find anything here,” he said quietly, looking at Hermione, who was still intently scanning her list.

“If we don’t, where are we going to get what we need?” she asked irritably.

A possibility arose in Ron’s mind, but he didn’t voice it. He drew Hermione slightly closer to him, looking warily at the dark-clad figures roaming the alley.

“There,” said Hermione, pointing at a shop that had boarded up windows but still appeared to be doing steady business, if the amount of customers flowing through the store was any indication. “See, giant’s blood is illegal to sell in Britain, even though it’s an important ingredient in many potions. An early draft of the Wolfsbane even had it, although it had to be altered to be easier to make...”

Hermione prattled on as they entered the shop, but she soon fell silent as they scanned the walls. The owner of the store ghosted through the shelves, speaking in low voices with several black-clad men.

“I think we should leave, Hermione,” said Ron warningly, the feeling of uneasiness growing.

“No, I think I’ve found it,” said Hermione quickly. “I know, this looks bad. As soon as we get this—”

“Crucio!”

Ron saw red.

“Just a little further,” said Harry, dragging Ginny along the corridor by her hand. She giggled and followed.

He felt slightly giddy. They had made no fewer than four stops along the way already, and Harry had almost put aside the thought of himself as a Horcrux, pushing it away with thoughts of Ginny.

He halted. They were standing in front of the portrait of Barnabas the Barmy.

“The room of Requirement,” said Ginny breathlessly.

Harry nodded and began the walk that had become routine to him after his fifth and sixth years. I need to find Voldemort’s Horcrux...I need to find Voldemort’s Horcrux...I need to find Voldemort’s Horcrux...

The door appeared, and they opened it into a room that was very familiar to Harry.

Ron spun, casting a quick Stunner and bringing down the man who was casting the Cruciatus Curse on Hermione. She sat, shaking, for a moment as Ron stood over her, protecting her.

The four other men in black circled him, wands out. Ron wasn’t about to stay there, outnumbered; he reached down and grabbed Hermione, Apparating them both out to the tent.

Or trying to.

He reached up, casting a quick shield charm to block the two unrecognizable curses that were sent their way. Hermione stood up quickly, standing back-to-back with him.

“Diffindo! Reducto!” Ron cried. Hermione conjured a flock of birds, sending them to attack the man in front of her as Ron’s cutting curse found its mark. The man Vanished the birds, sending a barrage of curses flying at them. Ron shielded them as Hermione cast a decisive Reductor curse, destroying the black-clad man.

The third man ran away quickly, looking at the grisly fate of his two companions and seeing that he was outnumbered. Ron turned to Hermione.

“Are you all right?” he pulled her toward him, and she buried her head in his chest.

“I’m all right. It was just a shock.” At his expression, she amended this. “Well, not really. You were right. We shouldn’t have come here in the first place. I should have known something like this would happen.”

Ron patted her on the back. “It’s over now. Let’s just take that blood and get out of this anti-apparation ward.”

“Who set that up?” mumbled Hermione as they walked cautiously toward the door. There was broken glass on the ground, covered with the blood of the two dead men. Ron felt a cold sweat run down his spine as he looked over at one of the first men he had deliberately killed.

He stopped as Hermione placed herself in front of him. “It’s what we have to do,” she said quietly. “We’re fighting so we won’t have to fight. Don’t feel guilt. Just know that you probably saved some poor muggleborn from death by one of these men.”

Ron smiled, and drew her close to him for a kiss.

“What is this place?” Ginny asked in awe as they walked slowly through the aisles.

“I found it last year,” Harry said quietly. “I was looking for a place to hide a book. I just asked the Room for somewhere I could hide something.”

“It gave you this place?” Ginny said, staring around. “Do you think Voldemort asked for the same thing? Somewhere to hide something?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry, feeling uneasy. He didn’t like to think of the parallels between himself and Tom Riddle. Hiding the evidence of their crimes...

He shook himself. “Just around the corner here. I’m positive.”

They turned, and Harry stared at the faintly glowing tiara, which sat dustily on top of an eyeless mannequin. “That’s it,” he said hoarsely. “That’s a Horcrux.” He reached forward to pick it up, but Ginny grabbed his arm.

“Don’t! We don’t know what it’s been spelled for!”

Harry glanced at her, then back at the tiara. It looked as if it had been very beautiful, once; now the silver was tarnished, and there were several holes where jewels must have once rested. It was of similar shape to the tiara that Fleur had worn that summer to her wedding; the date seemed ages ago.

“All right.” Harry quickly conjured a small wooden box. He used an odd-looking book to nudge the tiara into the box, then turned and looked at Ginny.

“Happy?”

She nodded and took the box from him, marching away with it. He grinned and followed.

“You were attacked?”

Ron shrugged, buttering himself a piece of toast. "There were only three of them. And one ran away."

"But someone set up a ward so you couldn't get away," Harry persisted. "That's important. That means someone was waiting and knew you were coming."

"And in that case it doesn't really make sense for them to only set three attackers on you," Ginny added. "If they went to all that trouble to set up an anti-apparation ward, why would they just let you walk away?"

Harry looked up and met Ron's eyes. "You were followed," he whispered, seeing the realization in his friend's face. "The ward showed them where you tried to Apparate, and they followed you."

"Where's Hermione?" asked Ginny quickly, setting the wooden box on the table. "We need to get out of here. Pack up the tent and get to London for the next Horcrux."

"Is that it?" asked Ron quietly, gazing at the wooden box. "What is it?"

"It's a tiara," Harry replied, his eyes also on the box. "We think it must have belonged to Ravenclaw. We found it in the Room of Requirement."

"Where's Hermione?" Ginny repeated, looking worried. "She isn't in her bedroom—"

Ron swore loudly. "She went outside. We needed some lacewing flies for the potion, and everyone knows you can find them in the forest—"

"Bloody hell," said Harry, tapping his tattoo with his wand. "Hermione! Where are you?"

"I'm on my way back," came the calm reply. "About ten minutes away."

“Disillusion yourself and run,” shouted Harry. “We think you were followed!” as the connection closed down, he turned to Ron and Ginny. “Let’s pack up the tent and get out of here.”

Ginny ran out the front door and Harry heard her gasp. At the same time, he felt the presence of a great number of people who didn’t belong.

“Avada Kedavra!”

He sprinted for the door, getting there in time to see her drop to the ground, the green spell going over her head. Harry looked up, seeing about twelve black-clad figures in front of him.

“Avis! Oppugnare! Diffindo, Reducto, Deletrius!” he shouted all five spells in one breath, drawing the sword at the same time. “Gladii!”

Ginny stood up quickly, back to back with Harry. She added her own flock of birds to Harry’s, attacking the figures.

“Accio masks!” shouted Harry. The Death Eaters, unprepared for such a spell, were caught by the spells, though several managed to retain their masks. Harry growled as he identified the Death Eaters. Two were systematically Vanishing the birds; Harry recognized them as Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. The leading Death Eater was Mulciber, followed closely by three Harry didn’t recognize and one that he did, though not by name, from the attack on Hogwarts at the end of last year.

Behind them was Peter Pettigrew.

Harry growled and pushed forward, away from Ginny. He cast a strong shield in front of him, maintaining it easily with his wand, while he lashed out with the sword.

He barely thought as he thrust the sword in front of the Unforgivables that passed his shield. Feeling a presence behind him, he swung, decapitating the big blond Death Eater he had recognized.



Ignoring the blood that splashed over his hands, he plunged further into the fray, issuing no attacking spells; his wand was used solely for continually recasting his shield.

Ron was right; seeing people he had killed already was unnerving.

“Harry!” came a shout. He turned quickly to see Ron defending Ginny while she waved her wand, magically packing the tent. Hermione was running through the trees toward them; Harry growled to see that she was not disillusioned like he had told her.

“Get out of there!” it was Ron who was yelling. “You know where we’re going! Just Apparate away!”

Harry stared for a moment, then growled and turned back to the battle. This would be one time that Peter Pettigrew would not walk away.

The rat was hanging back, letting the other Death Eaters do the work for him. Harry was slowly but surely making his way toward the man, though.

He winced as someone’s Cutting Curse made its way through his shield and scored his arm. Ron was right. He was hopelessly outnumbered.

“Expelliarmus!” the call came from three different directions, and Harry was suddenly fighting with the sword alone.

“Harry!” screamed Ginny, rushing into the battle. Harry swung about with the blade, blocking as many spells as he could. Many still got through; he knew that as soon as the Death Eaters realized that all they had to do was cast the Killing Curse in unison, he would be dead.

Still, he managed to chop off Mulciber’s arm, turning his head when he was splashed by the gore. The sword began to tremble in his hands whenever he absorbed a spell, and he knew he was exhausting himself.

He concentrated vaguely on the coordinates in London where he knew the Horcrux was, and felt the familiar squeezing sensation...

“Bloody hell!” Ron shouted, rushing into the fight. It had stopped for a moment, when the Death Eaters realized that they were no longer fighting anyone; there were approximately six remaining.

Harry’s leg hung in the clearing, revolving silently. There was silence as everyone stared at it.

“Diffindo!”

The spell broke the silence; it had been cast by Goyle at the leg. Ron winced as it hit its mark.

Ginny, breathless, turned to Ron, who nodded.

“Accio Harry’s leg!” he shouted. Hermione was already gone, with the tent. Ron grabbed Ginny and side-along Apparated her to the coordinates they had agreed on for the London Horcrux.

Hermione was there, ministering to Harry, who was groaning on the ground. A crowd of horrified and fascinated Muggles surrounded them.

“Bloody hell,” muttered Ron, pushing through the crowd.. Harry looked terrible, covered in blood, much of it his own, from the bleeding stump where his left leg belonged. “Hermione, how the hell do we reattach this?”

She looked up, tears on her face. “I don’t know. He’s been hit with cutters all over his arms, too. Ginny—” she looked around at the muggles and lowered her voice. “Call the Obliviators.” She raised it again. “This man is injured! Is anyone here a doctor?” Ginny ran quickly away, looking for the nearest WIZARDING building.

Ron watched as no one stepped forward. The Muggles all looked vaguely stunned; Ron supposed it would come as a shock for a man with one leg to suddenly appear in the middle of the street, covered in

blood and gore, and followed by several others who didn't look much better.

Any wizarding child was taught how to call Obliviators and Healers, from the time when they were very small; all Ginny would have to do would be to find a building marked as a wizarding residence. Hopefully she would be able to find one, and not everyone had evacuated to Hogwarts.

Ron glanced down at Hermione. She had cast a freezing charm on Harry's stump. Ron tried not to look at it; he knew they had done the wrong thing by moving the leg at all, but he had not wanted to risk losing it.

In most cases, Splinching was handled by the Accidental Magical Reverse Squad, but with the chaos the Ministry was in, Ron knew that they would not have been able to get any Ministry employees close to the Forbidden Forest before Harry was found by muggles and moved.

The trick to fixing a Splinching was that neither part of the body could be moved until one of the Squad appeared and performed the complex spell that caused the body parts to find each other. Until that point, both parts were theoretically in a sort of stasis which prevented injury.

By moving the leg, Ron had ended this.

He hoped he had done the right thing.

"What's going on here?" asked a new voice, and Ron looked up as a man came out of the nearest building. "What—" he caught sight of Harry. "What the hell is everyone standing about for? Get this man a doctor!"

"John, he just—he just appeared here," said a woman, swallowing visibly. "Just appeared with a pop." Ron started moving into a protective stance above Hermione and the unconscious Harry.

He glanced up as Ginny arrived at the cleared area, followed breathlessly by three men and two women in Auror uniforms. Ron breathed a sigh of relief, recognizing Kingsley as one.

“We need to get him out of here,” the black man said, leaning down to look at Harry. “Gods, Weasley, you brought him together when he was Splinched?”

Ron bristled at the anger in the Auror’s voice. “I wouldn’t have, but there were about twenty Death Eaters hovering around his leg and trying to cut it to bits!”

Kingsley looked taken aback. “Where?”

“The Forbidden Forest,” muttered Ron, keeping one eye on Harry as two men got him onto a stretcher. His friend was a ghostly shade of white; Hermione had done her best for his smaller cuts and his leg, but Ron knew he was still in great danger.

“All right. More Obliviators are on their way. This area has been sectioned off. Go with him, Ron.”

Ron nodded. “Thanks.” he glanced around in time to see Harry’s stretcher vanish, along with the two men who had held it, on their way to St. Mungo’s. Ron followed, Apparating into the visitor’s area and hoping against hope that Harry would be all right.

Harry woke, and for several moments wished he hadn't.

His left leg was one great mass of pain. He couldn't even distinguish which part of his leg the pain was coming from; it simply felt as though someone was administering a Cruciatus Curse to his leg alone.

The rest of his body felt heavy. He was wrapped firmly in white sheets, lying on a white bed, within white walls...

"Where am I?" he asked out loud, thankful that, unlike the last time he had woken up in a similar situation, his voice still worked.

"Harry!" came a shout from beside him. It was Ron. "Merlin, Harry, you weren't supposed to wake for another hour! You need a pain-relieving potion quickly."

Harry, who was feeling light-headed from the pain, wasn't about to argue. Ron quickly crossed to the door and spoke to someone outside. Moments later Harry was surrounded by two women and a man in Healer green. He gratefully drank the potion provided.

Ron had his wand to his tattoo and was speaking urgently, Harry supposed to Hermione and Ginny.

"Ron, what happened?" he had been fighting the Death Eaters in the Forbidden Forest, and then his mind was a blank. Ron looked pained, closing the connection.

"You Splinched yourself. Left your leg behind. I brought it back to you because the Death Eaters were trying to hack it apart."

Harry frowned. "Is that...bad?" he listened as Ron explained, shivering at the description of his stump. As far as he could see, his leg was simply wrapped in bandages.

"They managed to reattach the leg," Ron continued. One of the Healers had stayed behind, and nodded the affirmative. "But

Harry...you're going to have a limp. One of your legs is shorter than the other now. They did the best they could."

Harry stared at Ron. "A limp? For the rest of my life?"

"Likely," said the Healer coolly. "It was the best we could do for you, Mr. Potter."

Harry glanced around again, looking for something to distract him from the numb feeling that was overtaking him.

At least that wouldn't matter, if Luna's plan didn't work...

"Where am I?" he asked again, trying to change the subject. The room didn't look very similar to Arthur Weasley's hospital room of two years ago.

"It's a high-security suite," said Hermione, entering the room. "We couldn't have you in one of the regular rooms. The press or the Death Eaters would have gotten in. There have been too many security breaches here already."

Harry began to get a cold feeling. "Security breaches?"

"A...wing got set on fire last week, and some Healers have been targeted," said Ron, looking nervously at the Healer still in the room with them.

"What? Last week?" Harry asked, confused. "Why didn't we hear about it?"

"Er..." Ron and Hermione exchanged glances. "Harry..."

"What? What aren't you telling me?" he asked, the cold feeling rising.

Ron sighed. "You've been out for two months, mate. Splinching and bringing the bodyparts together is a big deal. It's January."

“What?” Harry shouted, jerking up.

“Mr. Potter, I need you to lie back down!” shouted the Healer as Harry felt an intense pain shoot through his leg and up his back. “There is nothing you can do about this now! If you cannot control yourself I will have to Stun you!”

“Two months?” he asked, staring blankly at Ron and Hermione. So much could have happened. So damned much...

“We haven’t been sitting on our arses, don’t worry,” said Ron. “The Order has been lying low, and we haven’t lost anyone from it.”

“What about...otherwise?” Harry asked edgily, shooting a glance at the Healer.

“Don’t worry, Harry. Healer Goom is an Order member. We wouldn’t trust just anyone to take care of you,” said Hermione. “And you guessed right...on Christmas day, Hogwarts was attacked.”

It took all his willpower not to move. He stared at Hermione with wide eyes, unable to say a word.

“We didn’t sustain very heavy damage,” Ron said gently. “The wards held. But we lost Madam Pomfrey.”

Harry let his head fall back with a jerk. “Is there someone there looking after the Hospital Wing, then?” he asked dully.

“That’s why Dad came here recruiting,” said Ron. “We have three Healers, including Healer Goom here.”

The green-clad woman looked up and smiled briefly at Harry before returning to her examination of his leg.

“What else has...happened?” Harry asked, staring at the grain of the white ceiling. Healer Goom stood up and left the room suddenly, looking at her notebook. Hermione closed the door behind her.

“We used Professor Dumbledore’s old Pensieve and watched the memory of you performing that spell in Parseltongue,” said Ron. “Well, it was Hermione’s idea, really. None of us can speak it well at all, but we worked at it, and Hermione managed the spell.”

“It was...odd,” added Hermione, scrutinizing him. “But...” she lowered her voice. “We found them all, Harry. All the Horcruxes.”

“When were you planning to tell us, mate?” asked Ron, just a hint of accusation in his voice. “We’re your friends. You know we can help you with this. Or at least try.”

“I should have guessed it,” said Hermione. “It makes sense, doesn’t it? Voldemort needed you for his resurrection ceremony, not just a great enemy of his. Of course he needed one of his Horcruxes. It’s something we should have known long before now.”

She seemed so matter-of-fact about it. Harry realized that this must be because they had had two more months to get used to the idea, while he lay prone in his bed.

The idea still terrified him.

“I was dealing with it,” he muttered. “I...thought it could wait until the end. Until we’d destroyed the others...”

He didn’t really know what to say. He had never expected them to find out, truly.

“That won’t take long, now that you’re awake,” said Hermione. “The incantation is in Parseltongue again. That’s what we think. All we need is for you to say it...”

Harry’s eyes widened. He hadn’t thought it would come to this so quickly.

There was nothing left between himself and the moment...



“I thought maybe you could drink the potion,” continued Hermione. “We would have to check it with Professor Snape, of course, or another Potions Master. I’m not sure if the Healers here are qualified to make that sort of judgment.”

It won’t work.

The thought came to him instantly, and he knew it as firmly as he knew his own name. Drinking the potion would do nothing. The fragment of soul that resided within him would have to be removed a different way.

“Where are the Horcruxes?” he asked quickly. Apart from his leg, he felt a strong as he ever did. Perhaps it had been whatever potion he had been given.

He wanted to end this now.

“We’ve been keeping them with us,” said Ron, looking warily at him. “I didn’t trust anyone else to hold onto any.” He reached into the bag that sat by his feet and slowly withdrew the tiara that Harry and Ginny had retrieved, and the golden cup that Harry recognized as Hufflepuff’s. “But Harry, I don’t know if you should do anything-you just woke up, after all-”

“No,” said Harry. “I feel fine. Where’s my wand? What’s the incantation?”

Hermione looked at his face, and seemed to make a decision. “I’ll get the potion.”

Ron stared after her, then looked back at Harry. “Harry, really—”

“I know what I’m doing,” said Harry, knowing that he really didn’t at all. “Where’s Ginny?” this question had been plaguing him throughout the conversation.

“She’s in the room next door,” said Ron. “No, don’t worry!” he added hastily, as Harry tried to stand, looking panicked. “She broke her arm

and they were having a bit of trouble healing it because it's been broken several times before. She'll be out by tomorrow. She's sleeping."

"How did she break it?" asked Harry, feeling bewildered. It was difficult to come to terms with the fact that two months of his life had vanished as he slept here, hidden. His friends had been out risking their lives and retrieving the Horcruxes, and he had done nothing.

Ron rolled his eyes. "She fell down the stairs coming to visit you." He gave a short laugh. "She wouldn't let herself be hurt in battle, don't worry."

This did very little to reassure Harry.

Hermione entered the room once more, a sheet of paper in one hand and a shrunken cauldron in the other. She locked the door and Silenced it. "Your wand is on the bedside table, Harry," she said, setting the cauldron down and enlarging it. The potion that it contained was green, the familiar green of the Killing Curse. Harry shuddered.

Hermione passed him the piece of paper, and he examined it. The incantation was very similar to the location spell. Harry brandished his wand. The sense of urgency he felt was strong. He needed to get rid of these things quickly. He could feel an odd, somehow familiar, cold sensation gripping his spine...

Hermione reached into her pocket and removed the large silver locket, setting it on the floor beside the other two. Harry pointed his wand.

"Salocente!"

Ginny woke groggily and moved her right arm experimentally. It didn't hurt.

Finally.

She stood up unsteadily. She was sick of the hospital bed that she had spent the last week in, and sick of the potions they had given to her. She still felt somewhat disoriented from their effects.

She pushed open the door absentmindedly, staring out into the darkened hallway and wondering what time it was. It seemed rather cold...

Some sixth sense made her pull her wand as she continued down the hall, wondering how Harry was. No, his room was the other direction. She turned and gasped.

“Expecto Patronum!”

She knew her magical reserves were not at their best; a tiny amount of mist formed at the tip of her wand, but failed to coalesce into any sort of corporeal Patronus.

She swore. “Ron! Hermione!” she shouted, sprinting to the door of the highest-security suite in the building and banging on it. She tried the handle, but the door was locked. She rattled it hopelessly, then drew her wand using her uninjured arm.

“Alohomora!”

It didn’t work. She turned and looked back. The Dementor was closing on her. She couldn’t stay here; obviously the door was Silenced, or there was some other reason Ron and Hermione couldn’t hear her. She knew that Harry was supposed to be waking up today.

She turned and ran, cursing her own cowardice.

“That’s it?” asked Ron, frowning. Hermione’s face was glowing.

The potion was gone. When they had submerged the last Horcrux, the cup, in it, it had made a slurping sound and disappeared completely, leaving only the blackened husks of the three items.

“It worked?” Harry whispered, staring at the empty cauldron. He didn’t trust himself to say it out loud. The remnants of the spell were still in his mind, and he knew deep down that the three Horcruxes were gone at last. The only one that remained...

“It worked,” said Hermione. “I’m sure.” She smiled. “I can’t feel them anymore at all.” The smile vanished. “All I can feel is you, Harry.”

Harry opened his mouth, but stopped as suddenly Ginny’s voice filled the room. “Ron! Hermione! Where the hell are you? There are Dementors here, all over the Hospital! One of them got into the High-security wing!”

Ron swore and stood. The moment was over. “Let’s get out there, Hermione.” He drew his wand, looking grim. Harry wondered again what had happened over the past few months that his two friends had omitted.

“Harry, you should stay here,” said Hermione, looking at him sternly while drawing her own wand. “It’s one thing to cast a spell sitting down in bed, but another to face Dementors after a two-month sleep.”

Harry nodded, more to get rid of them than to agree the point. He had no intention of staying in bed. Dementors here, now, had come as a shock, but it may as well have been fate. He knew what to do. He had to do it.

The time had come too soon. There was no going back now, though. This was his only option.

He hoped harder than he had hoped in his life that Luna was right.

He waited for about thirty seconds after Ron and Hermione left, and then stood. Muscles that hadn’t been used in months protested, and his leg screamed at him despite the potion. Harry cast a numbing charm on it and Vanished the bandages. He knew he wouldn’t have full mobility, but it was better than a leg weighed down by ten pounds of white cloth. He glanced at the wound, and wished he hadn’t;

Healing could only do so much. He supposed some part of a sawed off leg would have to heal naturally.

He walked carefully out the door, trying not to put too much weight on the foot, even though the numbing charm was removing all feeling.

This wing of the hospital was deserted, so he made his way gingerly down the hall. Was there no one else in the high-security wing? Had they all fled when they had heard the screams echoing from the hallways above?

He walked carefully up a set of stairs which led to a door. He opened it onto a scene of utter chaos.

“Where’s the Order?” Ron shouted at Hermione, pouring strength into his hawk-shaped Patronus. “Don’t they have word of this?”

“No one knew where the Dementors had gone, and they’re the only ones here!” shouted Hermione in reply. She was right. There were no Death Eaters here, only Dementors. And there were too many of those. They needed help. A few of the Healers had joined in with Patronuses of their own, but too few.

Ron looked to the side, where a Healer was cowering in the shadows. “Get out of here and warn someone!” he snapped at her, glaring. “Now!”

The woman jumped up and ran off, looking back fearfully. Ron could only hope that she had gone for help and not just to hide somewhere where an angry redhead wasn’t liable to shout at her.

“How did they all get in here?” one of the Healers shouted. “We’re warded against this sort of thing!”

“Don’t bother to ask!” Ron bellowed back at her. “Save your energy for casting!” he looked around, and noticed a black-haired figure clad in a hospital gown and blanket disappear around the corner. He blinked.

“Harry?” his attention wavered, and the hawk faltered in its flight. Ron concentrated on his memory of snogging Hermione in front of the fire and moved cautiously toward the corner the man had disappeared around. He couldn’t be sure it had been his friend. Harry wasn’t that stupid, was he?

He risked putting his wand to the tattoo, still concentrating on his happy memory. He could tell the bird was wavering. “Harry Potter!” he snapped out.

“Harry, where are you?” he shouted above the noise.

“Keep fighting, Ron,” said Harry, sounding resigned. “I know what I’m doing.”

“You bloody well don’t!” Ron bellowed. “Get the bloody hell back into the hospital wing, you idiot! You’re going to get killed!”

He heard a sound that it took a moment for him to identify as Harry laughing. “Keep fighting, Ron,” he repeated. The connection closed.

Ron felt a chill run down his back. His Patronus withered and disappeared. He ran around the corner, recasting the hawk as he went, this time trying a memory of himself, Hermione and Harry laughing in the common room on a sunny afternoon. It wouldn’t end like this. It wouldn’t.

“Expecto Patronum!” The problem wasn’t entirely being caused by the Dementors, Ginny decided. It was just as much because every Healer in the building had panicked on seeing the black-clad figures advancing, screaming and running around aimlessly.

She looked around as her Patronus pursued a Dementor around the corner. There were no other Dementors in this hallway, only sobbing Healers and patients. She sprinted around the corner, following her Patronus...

Her heart stopped.

Ron had told her he had left Harry in his room! But here he was, moving toward a Dementor, his wand not even drawn...

“Harry!” she shrieked, sprinting. She would get there too late. The Dementor was reaching out. Harry looked like he was in a trance. He looked up and met her eyes. She didn’t hear the words, but she saw them form on his lips as he embraced the Dementor. She halted, her Patronus flickering out.

“I love you too,” she whispered, dropping to her knees as Harry slumped away from the Dementor, his eyes closed. “I love you, Harry.”

There was a door...

Harry acknowledged the fact dreamily, drifting toward it. It was built of white stone, in the shape of an arch. Despite it being entirely open, he could see nothing beyond it but white mist.

He could hear faint sounds coming from beyond the threshold, tantalizing voices, familiar ones. In some faint sense he knew he wasn't hearing them with his ears, but something deeper. They sounded similar to the voices beyond the veil, in a sense...

Passing through that doorway, he would meet the bearers of those voices, people he'd been waiting for all his life...

He began to drift faster, through the emptiness that surrounded him, and toward the door, where his life would...

"No!"

Harry raised his head slowly. Someone was materializing from the mist beyond the gateway, standing just in front. Harry knew, in the way that somehow things were just certain, that the person would not be able to move any further toward him. They could not cross the sill.

The threshold could only be crossed once, coming one way.

"Cedric?"

His voice came out with a hoarse, echoing quality as the figure nodded, his features materializing as the familiar ones Harry recalled from three years before. Cedric looked peaceful, happy. He was clad in a plain white robe, but somehow he looked different.

The difference was that Cedric now appeared youthful, younger than Harry...

"You're doing well, Harry," said Cedric seriously. "You really are. But you can't cross through this door. Not yet. If you cross, you'll never be able to go back."



Harry stared at the white arch, not entirely understanding. He felt dreamy, like he had just woken from a long sleep and was longing to lay back down and dream again.

“But I want to.” And he did. He wanted to enter that land of white mist more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. He didn’t know where the sensation was coming from, but it was there, and it was pushing him forward.

“No,” said Cedric quietly, staring at Harry, who realized that they were now of a height. “Harry, I can’t lie to you. There are people who want to see you here. They want to see you so much. But not yet. Not now. You have a long life to live. You have to turn around.”

Harry didn’t want to turn around. There was a huge, impenetrable fear within him of what lay behind him. He didn’t want to turn his face away from the door.

“Harry!”

Ginny faintly heard the scream as Hermione sprinted for Harry’s unmoving body. The Dementor retreated, having gotten what it wanted. Ginny’s chest tightened. No. That monster would not escape with Harry’s soul.

She channeled everything she felt for Harry, staring at his body, his wide open, unresponsive green eyes. She felt the passion she had felt that afternoon as they kissed, after he had told her of his fear of dying. She felt the joy, the pain, she had felt at seeing him rise out of that coffin, alive after all.

What she brought up from inside of herself was not a specific memory, but an entire emotion, all the love that she felt for Harry. She wanted, wanted so badly, for him to wake out of that stupor, to look at her with his heart in his eyes again, to speak the words again...

“Expecto Patronum!”

The Patronus sprang from her hands, running toward the dementor at full speed. And it was running; it was a human shape, bearing a very familiar sword...

Ginny stared, wide-eyed, at her hands. Her wand was nowhere near her, having been lost at some point in the run after Harry. She had felt the power coursing through her, had felt something as that shape appeared.

Up until now, her Patronus had always come out as a tiger, the same as her animagus form. But now...

The figure took one massive swipe with its sword, cleaving the dementor in two. The black figure fell to the ground with a brief screeching noise, and for a moment the entire hospital was plunged into darkness, but for the glowing white figure that had, for the first time in history, killed a dementor. It turned and gave Ginny a brief salute before vanishing.

She lowered her hands, trembling.

And she knew she would never be able to conjure that white shape again, not in her entire life.

Something was happening around Harry's body. Mist was rising around him, she saw, as the lights turned on again. His mouth was opening, shaping words, but no sound came out.

She rushed to it, hoping...

"Do you know what this is?"

Harry stared dully as Cedric raised his closed fist in the air and opened it. A point of white light hovered an inch above his ethereal palm. Harry knew what it was, but he wanted to cross, so badly...he didn't want that light back if it contained a part of Voldemort.

"No," he whispered, not making eye contact.

“It belongs to you. It’s your soul, Harry. Untainted, untouched.”

Harry raised his head. “What?”

A small smile bloomed on Cedric’s face. “It worked, Harry. Your plan worked, until you let the dementor hold on to you for a bit too long.”

“I’m dead, then,” said Harry softly. An odd numbness was spreading, from his injured leg up into his chest. He had let the dementor hold him, kiss him, for just a bit too long.

“Not dead. A shell, is what you are on earth. Living, breathing, but unresponsive. All you’re missing...” Cedric reached out his hand. “All you’re missing is this.”

“ But how...how did you get that?” Harry asked, feeling the numbness move slowly, inexorably, into his arms.

“Harry, someone loved you enough down there that they were able to call your soul out of the dementor and destroy it.”

“Ginny,” he whispered.

“She loves you, Harry. But she loves the part of you that is you, not Voldemort. His soul is gone, Harry. Destroyed when she destroyed the dementor. She loves you that much. She wants you back down there.”

“He won’t respond,” Hermione muttered frantically, running her wand over Harry in diagnosis charms again. “He won’t wake up. He won’t do anything!” she sat back on her heels, eyes shut tightly. A tear leaked out.

Ginny stared hopelessly at Harry. They all knew what had happened. All they had left to do was admit it.

None of them were willing to.

But there was something. His mouth kept moving, as if he was conversing with someone, but soundlessly. It was something, but she didn't dare to hope.

"I would have to cross, to take that from you," Harry said softly, staring into Cedric's ghostly eyes. His indistinct hand was still held out, bearing the white light that Harry knew belonged to him. "Some part of me..."

"You are correct," said Cedric sadly. "Just your hand, Harry. Take my hand. It is nothing but a small sacrifice. We know you owe us nothing." The mist behind him was taking shape, resolving into faces, familiar ones, hundreds. Harry squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again. There was Sirius, beside his mother and father, three faces in hundreds, staring at him solemnly.

"We do not demand this of you, Harry," said Cedric, his voice echoing. "We ask it. We beg it. Take my hand. Rejoin the world of the living. It will be painful, but after only so long, you will be allowed to rest."

Harry stared from Cedric to the eyes of the masses beyond, stretching for what seemed like forever. He turned his eyes down to his own left hand, then reached out, across the threshold, and grabbed Cedric's, crushing down the white point of light. He heard a sound similar to that of millions of people letting out a breath in unison, and then everything, the doorway, Cedric, the faces, were gone.

And the knowledge came to him, that losing a hand would not be a deficit; it was a blessing, an advantage, and he had to use it .

Now.

"Harry!"

He smiled blissfully at Ginny. "I understand. I know, now."

He became aware of a sudden roaring, all-consuming pain, centered around his hand. He looked down to see it disintegrate entirely, replaced by a shadowy, translucent reflection.

His hand had become ghostly.

“You idiot! You Kissed a dementor, you didn’t even think about it, you didn’t think about yourself, you didn’t even think about me—”

Ginny was hitting him. It was a tiny extra pain to cope with above the fire that was consuming him, but it still hurt. He reached up slowly and removed her arm, sitting up at the same time.

“Your hand, Harry,” said Hermione, her face white. “What happened after the dementor? How—” she reached out hesitantly and touched the hand. Harry felt an odd sensation as her finger penetrated, and she quickly drew it away, shivering.

“Hermione...” he said seriously, “I saw Cedric.”

“You—” she looked stricken. “No, Harry, you were unconscious—”

“There was a white gateway,” said Harry dreamily. “My parents and Sirius were through it, but they didn’t want me to come. Not yet, they said...”

“Harry, what the hell happened?” asked Ron sharply from his position beside Hermione.

“I died,” said Harry distantly. “But Cedric gave me my soul back. And I have to go to him now. While he thinks I’m still sick. Or taken by dementors.”

“Go see who?” asked three voices at once, and then realization struck.

“No—” began Hermione.

“I’ll come,” said Ginny quickly. “There’s something...” she searched Harry’s face. “You have something.”

Harry smiled. He did have something. He didn’t know why he chose it, but when they appeared silently in the cemetery in Little Hangleton, he knew they had come to the right place. He could feel Voldemort’s presence, only moments away...

“Harry.”

He turned and found himself face-to-face with Hermione.

“Are you sure about this? You just got out of a hospital bed. You’re still limping. You just Kissed a dementor.” Her voice cracked. “Do you really think you can handle this right now? You only...” she took a deep breath, appearing to steel herself. “You’re only going to get one chance at this.”

You’re only going to get one chance...

He felt the sentiment echoed by a thousand voices, watching him from beyond that pearly white gate...

Take your chance...

Take your chance...

He reached into his own mind in a way that left him quite unsure of what he had done, and opened it wide for just one moment. He felt Voldemort’s realization, felt his glee, before he slammed up his weak Occlumency shield once more.

“The act of a Gryffindor, most certainly,” came a voice from behind. Harry spun. There was no one there.

“No, I’m still behind you, Potter.” Harry didn’t turn, instead taking the time to draw Gryffindor’s sword and hide his dead hand. Voldemort was taunting him, using a voice projection spell.

"I am a Gryffindor, Riddle," he called, trying to ascertain where Voldemort was. "I'm proud to be one."

"Yes, a Gryffindor. Brave to the point of utter foolishness. Coming to confront me now, weak and just out of a hospital bed? Certainly one for the history books. Why is your death wish so strong, Potter?"

Ginny growled slightly from beside Harry, peering around. Ron and Hermione had their wands out, and had both shed their cloaks.

"But this time you bring your friends into it, too. You want them to die as well?"

"I want you to die," said Harry steadily. "I am here for the dead. They demand justice."

A crackling laughter surrounded him. "Very well. You are here to die. Avada Kedavra!"

All four of them dropped to the ground instantly, the green spell flashing above their heads. Harry looked toward the direction it had come from, and cursed.

Voldemort had had the forethought to bring more than just himself. He was followed by six hooded black figures, all wearing masks and bearing wands. ‘

"Time to die, Potter," said Voldemort. Harry raised the sword at the same time as the green spell shot from six wands. The sword moved fluidly, as if it had a life of its own, deflecting three of the curses. Ron, Ginny and Hermione dodged the other three. Harry heard them moving around behind him, but he couldn't turn. The six were forming a circle, with Voldemort in the middle, and slowly closing in.

He heard a twittering as two flocks of birds flew to attack, their beaks sharp and lethal-looking. He saw a bear erupt from Ron's wand out of the corner of his eye and rush toward the Death Eaters, growling.

His concentration was taken up mostly, though, by the Dark Lord, who was shooting Cruciatus curses at him at a stunning speed and laughing. It was all Harry could do to dodge them all; he was realizing that his incorporeal hand was unable to grip a wand, so he was forced to drop the sword in order to cast his shield to repel the other curses being sent his way by the six others.

He felt sluggish, slow, like he was moving through water. He heard a cry as Ron was hit in the shoulder by a cutting curse, a gasp as Hermione narrowly avoided a Killing Curse. They were outnumbered, and they were being outfought.

He moved slowly closer to Voldemort, dodging his curses. "Deleo," he spat twice, only to have it repelled. His shield was all but useless against the Unforgivables Voldemort was sending at him, but he was moving closer.

Voldemort laughed, a high, cackling noise that echoed throughout the graveyard and sent a wave of chills down Harry's back. "Serpensortia!"

The two snakes that materialized were huge, green and lethal looking. Their tongues flicked in and out as they hissed wordlessly at him. Harry didn't dare try to speak to them after Voldemort gave them the command to kill, knowing it would be useless; instead, he followed his own instincts and transformed fluidly into the lion, roaring at the snakes and catching one immediately between his jaws. From the corner of his eye, he saw the other's head disappear from a precise Vanishing spell cast by Hermione.

The long body hung limply in his jaw, and he suddenly felt two spells crash against his fur. A fiery line of pain burned down his side. He changed back quickly, thankful that spells were not as effective against him in lion form. He had two long gashes running down the left side of his body, which were bleeding heavily, but he tried to ignore them.

He caught sight of Gryffindor's sword, cast aside, and picked it up quickly, holstering his wand and bringing the sword up in one quick movement to repel the Killing Curse as it sped toward him. He swung at Voldemort, who moved with lightning-fast speed backwards, and Harry was spun around in the downswing of the sword. A banishing



spell sent it away, and Harry brandished his wand again, feeling lightheaded from the blood loss. He could feel it seeping slowly down, through his clothes.

“What did you come here expecting, Potter?” came the harsh cry from the apparition in front of him. “Did you really think you could defeat me in a fair fight? You fools are all the same! You’ll die, Potter, just like your parents, just like Dumbledore!”

Harry surprised them both by laughing bitterly. “Not like Dumbledore, you stupid bastard,” he rasped, trying to stem the blood with his ghostly hand. “Not like him at all. You would know that, if you knew anything!”

Voldemort paused, looking momentarily confused, then disappeared with a crack. Harry heard another crack behind him and spun, casting a shield, but it was too late.

He felt a pain in his right hand as his wand was yanked out of it at a high velocity and flew into a gravestone. His arm broke with a crack from a hex he couldn’t identify. He felt a pressure on his back, forcing him to drop to his knees—

“Avada Kedavra!”

He stared up blearily. The curse was not aimed at him, it was aimed at—

“Ginny!” She had been immobilized by a Death Eater, and the sword was several feet away...Harry was on his feet, running, diving...

His incorporeal hand caught the green curse, absorbing it, and Harry felt pain such that he had never felt anything like it before. But he was running again, ignoring the pain, ignoring everything, running toward Voldemort, whose slitted eyes had opened further in shock, staring at the hand, his hand...his hands were around Voldemort’s neck, going through his neck, and the green was...

Slowly...disappearing, melting into the body that the hand was inside of...

The body beneath him went limp in his hands, and Harry rolled off, panting. He was bleeding. His leg had opened up again, his arm hung uselessly, and he could feel his entire body throbbing. Blood was flowing freely from the wounds in his side. And the ground below was shaking...

His glasses had fallen off, but he could see through blurred vision that the Death Eaters had stopped fighting. Ron, Ginny and Hermione were watching them warily, but that seemed to be the least of the Death Eaters' concerns; they were staring at their motionless leader and clutching their arms.

The ground was shaking even harder now, and smoke was rising. Harry tried to roll away, but his energy was simply used up, gone...he couldn't move, and the white archway waited beyond his vision, waited for the explosion...

"Harry! Get out of there!" Ron's body came rocketing toward him, landing heavily on top of him. He felt the obscene pressure of Apparation take him, squeeze him, and then they were safe, and the blackness took him once again.

He woke, again, to white walls.

“Sometime,” he mumbled quietly, “I’m just going to fall asleep, not get knocked unconscious. I swear, sometime it’s going to happen.”

He rolled over, and the slumbering shape of Ginny Weasley became apparent next to him, her left arm bandaged and a neatly stitched scar on her cheek.

He heard a soft chuckling from behind him and turned. Remus Lupin was sitting on a chair beside the bed, a book in his lap.

“Awake, finally. There are some people who want to see you.”

“Who?” said Harry, glancing around the hospital room.

“Quite a few, actually. Your friends, your classmates, the Minister, the press...of course, many of them can wait.”

“They’d better wait,” said Harry mutinously, imagining an army of Rita Skeeters descending on him.

“I’m sure you’d like to see—”

“Harry!”

Harry pushed himself up so that his back was against the wall as his two friends rushed into the room. Both were clean, wearing new robes, and looking extremely happy. Harry felt happiness swell within himself, as well, as he saw them, and glanced at Ginny, and realized that they had all survived.

“Hey, Ron,” he said, smiling. “Hi, Hermione.”

“Remus, McGonagall needs you out there,” said Hermione as she and Ron took two empty seats by the bed. “She thinks it’s over, and she says you can help the Healers.”

“What’s over?” asked Harry, frowning, glancing out the window across from him. It displayed nothing but a plain blue sky.

“Well...apparently that attack on St. Mungo’s last week wasn’t just random.”

“What?” said Harry. “Last week?”

“You’ve been in bed for a while, mate,” said Ron, grinning. “Long enough for us to sort everything out for you.”

“What happened?” said Harry again. “What’s over?”

“Mungo’s was part of a larger string of attacks, on the Ministry, on Hogwarts...pretty much every major building. That’s why Voldemort only had three Death Eaters when we got to him.”

“He thought you’d be easy, coming out a Hospital bed,” said Hermione, smiling. “He probably thought you were deluded, seeking him out like that.”

“We sure thought so,” murmured Ron.

“But no,” continued Hermione. “Ever since we brought you back here, we’ve been helping the Order round up all the Death Eaters. Apparently they all panicked as soon as they felt you kill Voldemort, Harry, but what else could they do but keep fighting?”

“Er...stop fighting?”

“Well, yes, and some of them did, and I’m sure that that will make a difference in their trials. Some who were under the Imperius curse, I mean.” Hermione continued. “But about you, Harry- there are about a thousand reporters waiting outside. We always have to push our way through them to get in here.”

“Sometimes we can just bring Hagrid, and he knocks them out of the way,” added Ron. “Or Snape. He seems to clear a path without touching anyone—”

“Snape has been here?”

“He just glanced in and left,” said Ginny, and Harry jumped, not having realized that she had woken. “I think he was on his way to see someone else, to be honest.”

“Is there something wrong with me?” Harry asked hesitantly. “I mean, I’m in bed for a week and nothing happens to any of you...”

“No, nothing,” said Hermione hastily. “I mean, the Healers say you drained yourself again, and that you might have been hit by the magical backlash when Voldemort died, but actually, I think Ron took most of that for you.”

Harry glanced at Ron, who reddened.

“I just got angry.”

“And this huge shockwave seemed to just bounce off him,” added Ginny, smiling slightly.

“He Apparated you to the Burrow because it was the safest place he could think of,” Hermione said, as Ron reddened further. “Ginny and I both ended up here, and we were terrified that you had been Splinched again.”

“And then we were distracted by the Dementors that were still running around,” grumbled Ginny.

“There were only a few, though. Some of the Order had arrived by then. Eight people got Kissed,” said Hermione sadly. “There were some Deaths at the Ministry too. None at Hogwarts, though. The Order was there, mostly.”

“And then I got you here and...now you’re here,” Ron finished lamely. “And all these reporters seem to think you’re ready to come out of a deathly coma to talk to them in the first minute—”

“A deathly coma?” Harry repeated.

A Healer, dressed in emerald green, entered the room. “We may have exaggerated your condition slightly, Mr. Potter. If only to keep them from breaking down the door.”

“They think you’ll die if exposed to too much human contact,” said Ron, casting an admiring glance at the Healer. “Dunno how Healer Smythe managed to convince them, but she did.”

Harry glanced at the woman, who was checking the bandage on his leg. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it, Mr. Potter. I like those pesky press about as much as you do.” She backed away from his leg. “This needs to be cleaned regularly, but other than that, you’re free to go.” She frowned. “I don’t know how you managed to achieve that hand, but you’re going to have to live with it. You can get out of bed and walk away, if you want. That is, if you want to brave that lot at the front.”

“Can we just...floo out, or something?” said Harry hopefully. He hadn’t even remembered his hand, though now that he looked at it, he knew it wouldn’t be of any use for the rest of his life, unless he wanted to startle people by putting it through them.

“There are no open communication channels in the Hospital at the moment,” said the Healer, shaking her head regretfully. “Everything was stopped during the attack. If that were not the case, you wouldn’t have quite so many waiting at the door.”

“Where did you want to go, Harry?” asked Hermione carefully. “Grimmauld Place?”

“No,” said Harry at once, thinking. He hadn’t actually decided yet. But...

“Somewhere far away, if possible?” he said, sighing. “Just away from all these people. Away from the hero-worship.”

“We could stay at Hogwarts, no one would bother us there—”

“Too close,” said Harry. He was filled with the powerful urge to get out of the country where he had grown up, to leave the devastation left behind by Voldemort, and to just live a quiet life for some time. For so long, he had dreamed of a Britain without Voldemort, and now that it had happened, he didn’t know what to do. Nothing seemed to have change where the people not on Voldemort’s side were concerned; the press were still hounding him, there were still Death Eaters out there evading justice, and from the pile of letters on his bedside table, Rufus Scrimgeour was still seeking his help.

Things had changed, but at the same time had not changed. Beside Scrimgeour’s letters were a pile from old school friends, Order members, and teachers, either thanking him or asking him to return; in Molly Weasley’s case, there was a charred mark where her Howler had been.

Beyond that were more letters, from people Harry didn’t even know; letters thanking him for finally ending the war, containing sweets, singing cards, or in one case a marriage proposal, which had had Ginny laughing.

Harry slipped out of his chair and into a pair of sandals, glancing out the window. The sun shone, reflecting off the white sand of the beach and the water beyond it. He could hear splashing and shouting; Ron was out there trying to learn to surf, and Hermione was watching him, smiling, with a book in her lap.

It was Hermione’s house, her parents’ beachfront property in France. They had added Unplottable charms to the house, removing the chances of someone being able to find it that they didn’t want. Visitors came, occasionally; just the previous day Remus and Tonks had left, saying they needed to get back to the real world. Harry had no such convictions, and he didn’t think any of his friends did either;

he was slowly healing here, letting his fighting instincts disappear, learning how to swim, and re-learning how to fly a broom. Tryouts for the Chudley Cannons began in a month, and Harry and Ron had both been invited; in fact, Harry had been invited to try out for nearly every team in the league, and had been offered spots on most of them, but Ron had browbeaten him into coming out for the Cannons.

Harry padded out of the small house and onto the beach, pulling off his shirt as he did so. The sun beat down, hard, on the back of his neck and his scalp. He grinned down at Ginny, who was lying in a beach chair and also shaking her head at Ron. The fourth finger on her left hand gleamed with the silver and diamond engagement ring that he had found for her just over a week ago.

“We’re going to have to go back eventually,” she murmured quietly to him as he sat beside her, watching as Ron fell off the surfboard for the fourth time in as many minutes. “You’re hiding, and everyone knows it.” She rubbed his back and grinned, showing him it was a joke.

“Eventually,” he shrugged. “Not now, though.”